FATAL GAMES

A NEW ELM STREET NOVEL

FREDDY KRUEGER'S™ TALES OF TERROR

BASED ON THE CHARACTERS CREATED BY WES CRAVEN

BRUCE RICHARDS

TOR®
0-812-55189-3★ $3.99/$4.99 CAN/

Annotation

IT'S NOT WHETHER YOU WIN OR LOSE… UNLESS YOU'RE PLAYING DEADLY GAMES!

Al was sprawled out on top of the bed, half covered by just a sheet. His body was wet with perspiration. His face was beet red and filled with terror.

"No!" Al bellowed in his sleep. "He can't be! It was all a joke! I was only joking! Noooo!" His features contorted into a gruesome mask of revulsion.

And then Al suddenly rose from the bed and came at Chip like a lunatic caught in a trance. Before Chip knew what was happening Al had his meaty hands around Chip's neck.

Chip tried to pry his brother's hold loose as he realized he couldn't get any air.

He slapped his brother in the face as hard as he could, but Al's grip only tightened.

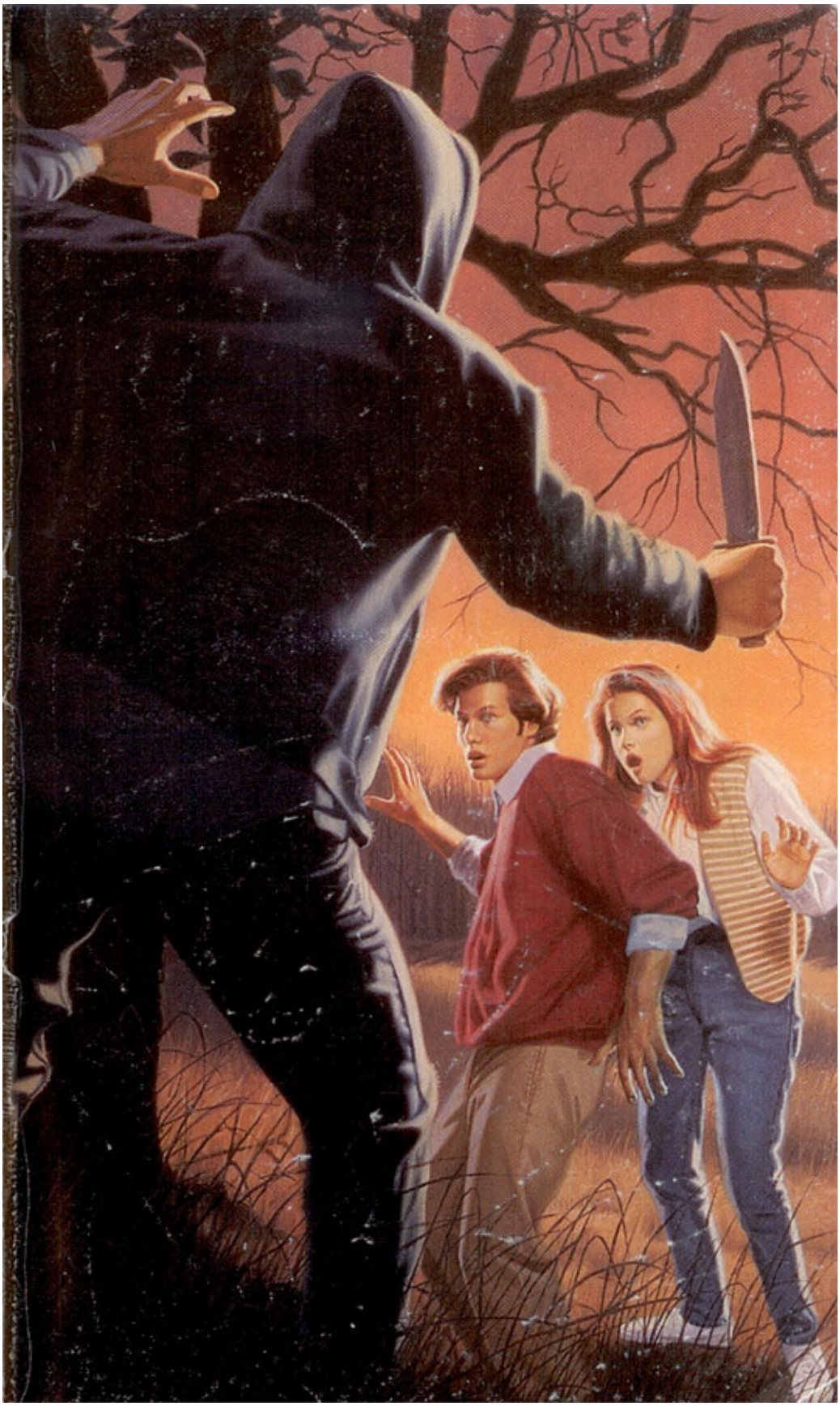
"Al!" Chip croaked hoarsely as Al's steel-like fingers bit into the skin of his throat.

Al was strangling him to death!

- Bruce Richards
  -
  - Prologue
  - Chapter 1
  - Chapter 2
  - Chapter 3
  - Chapter 4
  - Chapter 5
  - Chapter 6
  - Chapter 7
  - Chapter 8
  - Chapter 9
  - Chapter 10
  - Chapter 11
  - Chapter 12

- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16
- Chapter 17
- Chapter 18
- Chapter 19
- Chapter 20
- Chapter 21
- Chapter 22
- Chapter 23
- Chapter 24
- Chapter 25
- Chapter 26
- Chapter 27
- Chapter 28
- Chapter 29
- Chapter 30
- Chapter 31
- Chapter 32
- Chapter 33
- Chapter 34
- Chapter 35
- Chapter 36
- Chapter 37
- Chapter 38
- Chapter 39
- Epilogue

Bruce Richards
Freddy Krueger's Tales of Terror #2: Fatal Games



Prologue

A football tumbled down a long flight of stairs. It skipped past a blazing boiler, bounced off the toes of a pair of scruffy brogans, and rolled to a stop in the shadow of a tall, angular man.

A razor-tipped finger speared the ball. "I told those kids not to play in my yard."

The sounds of playing children filled the air. A small group of young girls was skipping rope nearby. Their song floated through the air.

"One, two, Freddy's coming for you…"

The man in the basement adjusted his floppy hat and glared up the stairs. The fire inside the boiler suddenly blazed out of the opened boiler door. The blast of heat singed the last few strands of hair left on the man's scarred face, a face that had already been burned many times over.

"Hey, mister, can we have our ball back?" a kid's voice shouted from above.

"Why don't you come down here and get it?" the man replied. "I could show you a few new plays."

The kid didn't answer. Maybe he sensed the evil in the man's voice.

Freddy Krueger snickered. "Afraid I'll penalize you for being out of bounds?"

Still no answer.

Freddy cackled. "You should be. It's going to cost you more than ten yards."

"You'd better give me my ball back, or I'll sic my big brother on you!" the kid shouted. He was trying to sound tough, but his voice was laced with fear.

Freddy smiled.

"I'd like to meet your brother," Freddy chortled back up the stairs.

Another flame burst through the door of the old cast-iron boiler as Freddy spun the football atop a razor-sharp finger. "I was a pretty good football player as a kid. Of course, they wouldn't let me play much. The coach said I had bad hands. Every time I played, the game was called on account of pain."

Freddy cackled madly at his sick pun, as he held the football through the open boiler door. He wrinkled up his nose at the smell of burning rubber, then pulled the ball back out like an overcooked marshmallow. He flicked it to the ground and kicked it away in disgust, but it bounced off the wall and came back to him.

"No, I never got to play in many games. Seems like I was always penalized for unnecessary roughness. My coach said I had raw talent but I needed to sharpen my skills — that was the time I listened to my coach."

Freddy snatched the ball off the ground and dropped back like a quarterback looking for an open receiver. "But when I did get to play, I could throw a pretty mean bomb."

Freddy whipped the ball through the air in a tight spiral.

"A killer of a pass…"

Chapter 1

Chip Parker charged across the barren field as the football spiraled toward him. He knew he would catch it. He always did.

Chip was six-foot-two, with shoulders that could be depended upon — by any coach, by any girl. He was handsome, too, sure to be voted best-looking in his graduating class. Except that he wouldn't be graduating with his class. Not with the move coming up.

He reached his arms out and felt the leather hit his fingertips. He juggled the ball for a moment till he gained control, then felt the moment of satisfaction as he pulled it down into the pit of his stomach.

Then he hit the wall. In the flicker of a moment, he saw his own nose break open like a glass ketchup bottle, and felt a sharp pain in his head like no other he had ever felt before.

He closed his eyes, clenched his jaw, and prepared to hit the ground. Once he was down, he opened his eyes and through a bloody red film saw a shadowy, hooded figure standing over him.

"Al?" Chip said, confused. He held out his hand, expecting his brother to help him to his feet. But instead. Chip caught a glimpse of something shiny.

A gleaming switchblade knife with a red dragon on the handle.

He heard a cackling laugh, soft at first, then growing louder and louder.

In that moment, Chip felt a wave of terror so intense that he thought he might actually die from fright. Then he saw the eyes — eyes on fire, burning red in the darkness.

The eyes of a lunatic.

Chip heard his own scream of terror as the hooded figure raised the knife high above him and prepared to kill. As the cold metal pierced his skin. Chip looked up for the last time. A geyser of blood spurted out from his chest, splashing over the handle of the switchblade.

A silent scream erupted from Chip's throat as he felt himself drown in his own lifeblood.

Chapter 2

"Aaagh!"

Chip threw the blankets off the futon. His breath came in short, rapid gasps. His pulse raced.

Where was he?

Still in his dream? His nightmare? He forced himself to take a long, deep breath.

A cold draft slipped through the open bedroom door, touching Chip like an icy finger, sending goosebumps up his arms and down his back. It was late autumn. It was supposed to be cold, he realized.

But why was his bedroom door open? He was sure he had closed it, to keep out the sounds of Al and his mother arguing.

Chip's eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness and he looked around the room for comfort. Then a floorboard creaked. Someone was in the hallway, hiding in the darkness, looking in the room at him.

Large beads of perspiration collected on Chip's forehead. The vision from his nightmare returned. The hooded figure he thought might be Al…

But that was just a nightmare. Was he imagining things now?

Chip lay back against the futon. It was just the nightmare, he told himself. There's no one out there.

Chip felt another cool breeze blow into his room.

That was it! The breeze must have cracked his door open. He was spooking himself for nothing.

Chip swiveled his head to look at the digital clock on the floor next to him. Just a little past midnight.

He pulled the covers back over himself. He needed to sleep. Badly.

He had a long day ahead of him tomorrow.

Tomorrow he would be moving to Elm Street.

He willed himself to go back to sleep, but the harder he tried, the more wakeful he became. The nightmare was still too fresh in his mind. The gruesome images of it gripped him and wouldn't let go. What did they mean? Who was the hooded figure in his nightmare who had slammed him in the face, smashing his nose open like an overripe blackberry?

And then attacked him with a knife.

There was something about that knife. About the way it had looked. Chip tried to revive the image, but it eluded him.

Chip scanned the charcoal sky outside his window. A huge full moon hung comfortably low amid a million sparkling stars. From the apartment above, he heard the neighbors arguing. Next door, the bedsprings squeaked and the fat woman who lived there uttered a loud curse that easily passed through his thin bedroom wall.

Chip hated this apartment. It was just like every other grimy place they had lived in since his family had moved to Middleton when he was just a baby.

He was glad they were moving into the new house.

Even if it was on Elm Street.

Where Freddy Krueger had once lived.

And killed.

Chip could still vaguely recall hearing about the Krueger murders when he was a little boy. The stories had been on the TV news for weeks. Whenever they showed a picture of Freddy Krueger, Chip would suddenly burst out crying. He would wail and scream and nothing would comfort him. His mother had thought it odd.

And, of course, his brother Al had kidded him about it for years. Al was so good at prodding a person's sore spots. Heartless taunts. Obnoxious behavior. Chip had become accustomed to it all.

Chip watched the last of the leaves blow off the hickory tree outside his window. The tree quivered to the will of an icy wind.

With a shudder, Chip pulled the covers up over his nose and stared at the bedroom ceiling. The jagged shadow of a branch threatened him, as if it would skewer him through his blankets.

Despite the cold, Chip's pajamas were soaked with sweat. He couldn't get the nightmare out of his mind.

Those eyes.

Those ghastly glowing red eyes that stared out of the hood.

Then he heard it again.

But this time he knew he wasn't imagining it.

Something outside his door.

Or was it coming from another apartment in the crowded tenement? As Chip tried to gauge the source of the sound he felt another rush of paranoia.

He focused on the crack where the door was slightly ajar, waiting for whatever it was to show itself.

But why was his door open? he wondered again.

He was sure he had closed it. He had closed it to shut out the noisy argument Al and his mother had been having before she had left for her job as a cocktail waitress — the job she hated so much.

Like all the other menial jobs she had to swallow her pride to keep.

But even through the closed door he had heard their shouts. Their arguments were always the same.

"Al — grow up! Stop feeling sorry for yourself! Get a life!"

"I've got a life. The sorry life you and your loser husband gave me when you adopted me."

"Don't talk about your father that way! Have a little respect for the dead. Your father, may he rest in peace…"

"He wasn't *my* father. He was Chip's father."

"He raised you like a son, and for that you should be grateful. Instead of being spiteful and petty all your life because you were adopted. Instead of being mean to your brother all your life. If you can't act like a decent human being then just leave. You're eighteen!"

And on and on, his mother and Al, bickering.

A picture of Chip's father entered his mind.

His father had been a janitor at Middleton High until a few months ago, when a boiler had blown up in the basement and scalded him to death.

Chip had loved his dad. He knew his dad had had a drinking problem, but he had never been a mean drunk. He'd never hit Chip or his mother, although once he had slapped Al for driving drunk.

His drinking problem had caused his dad to lose most of his jobs. It had looked like the janitor thing might work out — but then the accident… Chip felt tears forming in his eyes and blinked them away.

Chip thought he heard heavy breathing coming from the doorway.

"Mom? Is that you?"

No answer.

"Al?"

The crunching sound in the hall outside his bedroom started again. Chip sat up slowly on his futon. He stared into the dark hallway, stared into the shadows, as the crunching grew louder. In the eerie glow of the bright full moon, Chip thought he saw the glint of a knife.

"Who's there?" Chip called, surprised to hear his voice crack.

The crunching stopped, lips smacked, and soft laughter trickled in from the dark hallway.

It must be Al, goofing around. Al, who at six-foot-four was two inches taller than Chip. Al, who was Chip's only undoing.

"Who's there?" Chip asked again, impatient this time.

The answer sent a chill up his spine.

The voice that answered was as soft as fresh dirt on a grave.

"It's your father."

Chapter 3

"Yeowwww!"

Chip sat bolt upright on the futon, scattering the covers.

From the shadows, Al roared with laughter. He stepped into Chip's bedroom. Al was a year and a half older than Chip, with very broad shoulders and a bullish neck. A weightlifter's physique. His face was a mass of sharp angles, and his short blond hair was cut punk — spiky on top and short on the sides.

In the moonlight, Al reminded Chip of a Mohican warrior.

"Man, I really had you going," Al said, nearly in tears. "You are *so-o-o* easy!" He sliced another section of apple with the switchblade knife he always carried and used the tip of the blade to shove it into his mouth. "Yeowww!" Al screeched, mimicking Chip. "You scream like a *girl*, bro', you really do. Like some little girl who found a bug in her bookbag."

"Shut up, Al."

Al spat an apple seed on Chip's bedroom floor. "Yeowwww!"

"Don't you ever get tired of spying on me?" Chip laid back on the futon.

"No," Al said, approaching the bed. "Besides, I wasn't *spying* on you. You were moaning and groaning like a little girl so I decided to check you out. See if you were wetting the bed or what. Did wittle Chippy have a baad dweam?" Al said in baby talk.

Chip tried to control his temper as he looked up at Al. He noticed that beneath his black leather jacket, Al wore a hooded sweatshirt.

A hooded sweatshirt… just like the guy in his dream.

Al sliced another section of apple with his knife and popped it into his mouth. "Moving to Elm Street getting to you? Afraid you're going to meet up with your daddy there?"

That was another of Al's sick jokes. Suggesting that Chip's *real* father was Freddy Krueger. That mom had had an affair with you-know-who when she had lived in Springwood, when she was still a teenager.

In fact, Al liked to tell Chip, the *reason* they had moved from Springwood was because of who Chip's real father was.

"Your real daddy will be glad to have his son living nearby," Al went on. "Reunited at last."

Chip ignored Al.

"Let's face it, Chip — you're just a *chip* off the old block. Like father, like son."

"At least I would know what my father looked like if I saw him," Chip finally said. Sometimes it was hard to ignore Al. "That's more than you can say."

Al's face turned into an angry scowl. "Watch your mouth!" he said, pointing the switchblade knife at Chip in a menacing gesture. Something about the knife stirred Chip's memory of his dream.

Chip got out of bed and started to get dressed.

"What are you doing?" Al asked.

"Going to go meet Daddy," he answered sarcastically. Sometimes Al was too much.

"Huh?"

"Let's go. You said my real father was waiting for me. Why wait till tomorrow? Let's go pay him a visit, tonight."

"Where?"

"Where do you think? Elm Street. Our *new* house."

"Now? In the middle of the night?"

"Scared, Al? Huh? Scared we might meet Daddy and he might not like the way you've been treating his favorite son? C'mon. We'll take the van and move some stuff in tonight. We'll leave Mom a note. She can meet us there tomorrow."

Al hesitated and Chip realized he had gotten to him.

"Chicken, Al? Like you think I'm chicken?"

"Who you calling chicken?" Al asked, giving his brother a dark look.

"You."

Al wiped the blade of his knife on his faded jeans and pocketed it. "Let's go."

An hour or so later, after packing the van, they were stopped on a dark street in Springwood.

"Don't tell me you got us lost, you ditz," Al said, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, looking out the windshield nervously. A sudden fierce wind rattled the van, and the inside of the vehicle grew colder. Chip turned up the heater.

Chip peered at the map, lit by the tiny light of the glove compartment. "Turn here," he told Al. "Then make the next right."

Al made the turns, and steered the van onto Elm Street.

The boys had been to the house before, during the day. The real estate agent who had taken them around hadn't talked much about the house, but Chip figured that anything would be better than the cramped, smelly apartment they had been living in. And he was looking forward to going to Springwood High. It had been tough going to Middleton when his dad had been the janitor there. Now that his dad had died right there in the school basement it would have been even harder. Chip felt tears start to burn his eyes. He still hadn't gotten over his dad's death. He wondered if he ever would.

Chip tried to distract himself by looking out the window for the house. Elm Street looked totally different by night.

Chip noticed a decrepit-looking old house with a for sale sign out front. The sign was tilted at an odd angle. The ghastly looking place sent a chill up Chip's spine. In the glare of the streetlight, the grass appeared to be as dead as the trees. A stray dog sniffed at the edge of the yard, then quickly ran away.

"Is that it?" Al asked, slowing down as they approached.

"I hope not," Chip said, running a shaky hand through his thick brown hair, glancing again at the map. Maybe this wasn't such a hot idea after all, moving in at night. He shined a flashlight on the house, looking for the number. The light beam reflected off the eyes of a cat, which quickly scampered away.

"I think we're down the street a bit," Chip said, relieved.

Al grumbled and drove on.

Chip was studying the houses they passed when something leapt at him from the backseat.

"Yikes!" Chip exclaimed as an enormous black cat landed on his lap. "Maggie!" he said, scratching his pet behind the ears. "You nearly scared me to death. I didn't know you were back there."

The cat mewed softly and stared up at Chip with bright green eyes. Fearful eyes. Despite her large size, Maggie was the biggest scaredy-cat on four feet. This move wasn't going to be easy on her.

"I think this is it," Chip said, pointing to a house that didn't look much better than the decrepit one they had just passed. "Number thirteen."

Maggie raised her head as Al slowed the van. Suddenly the hairs on Maggie's back stood on end.

Chip smoothed the hair down and gazed at the house again. "I know how you feel, Maggie."

"I can't believe your mother actually bought this dump," Al grumbled.

"C'mon, you've got to admit it's better than that crummy apartment, and the trailer before that," Chip insisted, staring up at the dark, gloomy-looking house. In the gleaming moonlight it looked like something out of a low-budget vampire movie. Only worse.

"If your deadbeat dad could've held a job for more than six months we wouldn't have had to live in all those scuzz holes," Al said, pulling into the driveway.

"I thought you said Freddy Krueger was my dad," Chip reminded Al.

Al grunted and parked the van, but neither he nor Chip made a move to get out. They sat in silence, staring up at the dismal-looking house.

"Your mother must have been out of her mind," Al finally said. "Like your father. You'll probably end up the same way."

One of the shutters on the house hung loose on a squeaky hinge. As Chip watched, the wind began to bang it against the side of the house.

"At least Mike did the right thing by getting himself killed and leaving your mother some insurance money," Al said. Al always called Chip's father Mike, never Dad. "Maybe that doughnut shop will be a great success and she'll make a ton of money."

"I wouldn't worry about it, Al. Even if she makes a million dollars, I doubt she'd give any of it to you."

"There're other ways to inherit money," Al said ominously.

Chip gazed up at the window of what would be his bedroom. A shadow moved across the window — someone was there! Looking out the upstairs bedroom window! Chip strained his eyes like laser beams cutting through the darkness. He saw the somebody pacing back and forth in front of the window. A hooded figure. Then the hooded figure was at the window looking out again, looking down at him. Then it quickly pulled away.

"I think we have company," Chip said.

"Huh?"

"Someone's up there."

Al gave his brother a crooked smile. His eyes grew wide with mock horror. "Let me guess who it is. Is it Dad-dy?"

"For real. I saw someone. Wearing a sweatshirt with the hood pulled up."

"Well, let me see. That could be any teenager in Springwood, since almost everyone owns a hooded sweatshirt."

Maggie suddenly screeched, making Al jump. Chip could tell Al was more nervous than he let on.

"You should have left that stupid cat back at the apartment — permanently," Al said sharply. "What's her problem?"

"Maybe she saw what I saw."

"Yeah, right," Al said, shooting him a disdainful look. But still he made no move to get out of the van. "So what do you want to do?"

"Maybe we should call the cops," Chip suggested.

"Are you serious?" Al said. "You *really* saw someone in there?" Al's eyes roamed over the house. "Where?"

"Upstairs."

Al stared at the upstairs window. "You know why your mother got this house so cheap, don't you?"

"I know." A heavy silence hung in the van. Those poor girls… Chip remembered their names: Ellen and Tiffany. They had been cheerleaders. Chip remembered them from the times he had played football against Springwood. Pretty girls.

Chip had dated a cheerleader — Melanie Wilson. He had taken her to the movies a few times, and out for ice cream. But Melanie had seemed more interested in being seen with him than in seeing him. Al told him he was a stupid jerk for breaking up with a hot babe like Melanie. Maybe Al was right. Beautiful girls weren't exactly a dime a dozen.

Chip started to refold the road map he had been using, but it was dark and he made a mess of it. Finally, in frustration, he crumpled it and shoved it into the glove compartment. He slammed the glove compartment door shut and climbed out of the van, Maggie at his heels. A moment later Al was at his side, his jaw muscles clenched the way they always did when he was uptight about something.

Maybe this wasn't such a hot idea, Chip thought as a cold breeze blew a cluster of dead leaves toward him. Maggie jumped back skittishly as the wind banged the loose shutter against the side of the house. Al jumped too, shooting a glance up in the direction of the sound, a sound as sharp as a rifle

shot. "That shutter's the first thing that's going," he said, nervously pounding his right fist into his palm in time to the banging shutter.

Chip noticed that the sides of the house were overgrown with wild-looking vines, like chains holding the house prisoner.

"This place is already driving me nuts," Al muttered under his breath.

Maggie rubbed nervously against Chip's leg, stopping every now and then to glance up at the house. "What is it, Maggie?" Chip asked. "What's up there?"

"Huh?" Al barked.

"I was talking to the cat."

"Oh." A gust of wind blew Al's hood up against the back of his head.

Maggie darted away.

"Maggie!" Chip called, but the cat had already disappeared into the night. He started after her.

"Let her go," Al said. "Maybe she'll catch a rat or something. Earn her keep for a change."

But Chip ignored Al. This was a new neighborhood for all of them and he didn't want Maggie to get lost. At night. On Elm Street.

Chip brushed through the bushes around the house, but Maggie wasn't there.

"Maggie!" Chip called. But the only answer was the wind whistling through the bare branches near the house. He returned to Al, who was still staring up at the window. Chip followed his brother's gaze, but the hooded figure was gone.

"Maybe it's some kids," Chip suggested. "You know, on a dare, goofing around. Because of the murders. They probably wanted to see where it all happened."

Al considered this. "So let's go up there and chase the little punks out. Beat the crap out of them for messing around in our house." Al resumed his fist-pounding.

"We could," Chip said. "Or we could just ask them to leave."

"Whatever." Al flexed his muscular arms and cracked his knuckles one by one.

They started to walk tentatively toward the house. But when they were within a few yards of the front door, they heard a hideous screech.

It came from inside the house.

Chapter 4

Chip wanted to call the police for sure now, but he felt strangely paralyzed. He listened to the rapid pounding of his heart — like the shutter banging against the house.

"What was that?" Al asked, rubbing his sweaty palms through his spiky blond hair. He sounded as scared as Chip felt.

"I don't know," Chip answered, awed by the rush of his own adrenaline. The hairs on his neck prickled. Despite his fear, Chip felt driven to find out who — or what — was inside. He tried to persuade himself that it was just some local kids on a dare as he slowly crossed the broken flagstone walk and started up the front steps to the open porch.

The front door was open a crack. He hesitated. Should he go in? It wasn't too late to run back to the van.

Chip felt something grab his shoulder. He spun around as his heart shot into his throat. It was Al, holding a tire iron from the van.

"It's your move, Mr. Call-Me-a-Chicken," Al taunted, making little chicken sounds. He handed Chip the crowbar, then flicked out his switchblade. "After you."

Chip couldn't back down now.

The tire iron felt cold and hard in the palm of Chip's sweaty hand. It wouldn't be hard to bash someone's brains in with this thing, Chip thought, swinging it gently, feeling the weight. He wondered if he could crush a skull in if his life depended on it.

He hoped he wouldn't have to find out.

He pushed the door open and stepped inside. As he crossed the threshold, he suddenly thought of Evan Walker — the boy everyone had blamed for the two murders. Evan's class picture had been on the front page of the newspapers. He looked like a bookworm with his thick glasses. The papers had also carried pictures of the spot where Evan had hanged himself after stuffing the girls' bodies into the fiery furnace. And now, Chip was here in that same house… *his* house.

The air was steeped with the aura of death.

Chip pulled the flashlight from his back pocket and flicked it on. In the cone of light he saw Maggie's cat paw prints on the sooty living room floor.

Was it Maggie who had made that hideous shriek? He made a silent prayer that his cat was still alive.

Chip moved the flashlight ahead. Maggie's paw prints were joined by a larger set of footprints. Both sets of prints ran up the stairs. Chip followed them with the light.

"After you," Al said again, poking Chip in the butt with the point of his switchblade knife.

Chip slapped Al's hand away. "Quit it. I'm going."

Chip mustered his courage and made his way up the steps, one creaking stair at a time. Al followed a safe distance behind.

Partway up the staircase, Chip stopped short. He heard a strange sound coming from above. Chip nearly toppled backward into Al as a large section of dingy wallpaper curled off the wall and fell to the floor at his feet.

Behind him he could hear Al's heavy breathing. Then Al made the derisive little chicken sounds and Chip started up the groaning staircase again.

Outside, the crickets had stopped chirping. It was oddly quiet now. There was a sour smell in the house. Chip listened to the silence, as if the house itself were about to tell him of the horrible things that had happened within its walls.

Chip reached the top of the stairs and shined the flashlight left, then right, the light revealing a long, dusty hallway. At each end of the hallway was a door.

The cat's paw prints zigzagged over the larger footprints and led to the right. Chip followed them to the bedroom at the end of the long hallway, where he had seen the hooded figure. The bedroom door was slightly ajar. Chip pushed it open a few inches more with the tire iron. He was gripping the weapon so tightly his hand ached.

Something banged loudly inside the room!

Startled, Chip dropped the flashlight. It clattered to the floor and the light went out.

Chip and Al stood frozen in the dark.

"Sounds like the wind blew a door shut in there," Chip said, groping along the floorboards for the flashlight. He found it and picked it up, then clicked it on and off a few times, but nothing happened. He slipped it into his back pocket.

"Nice going, ditz," Al muttered.

Chip heard a tapping sound behind him and spun around, but it was only Al, nervously tapping a cigarette on the side of its pack. With a click of his lighter, Al lit the cigarette; then the lighter went out and the hall was dark again. Chip stared at the glowing red dot of Al's cigarette for a moment. It was almost hypnotizing, taking him into the deep reaches of his subconscious — the part of his mind that remembered his dreams.

"After you," Al said again, the bright ember dancing up and down as he spoke with the cigarette stuck in his mouth.

It had become a sick game to him, and the loser was the guy who chickened out first.

Chip was determined not to be the loser.

He stepped into the room. It was large and bare. It would make a nice bedroom, Chip thought.

The window was open a crack. The bare branches of an elm tree outside the window rattled like skeleton bones. Silvery moonlight shined into the room, casting jagged swordlike shadows across the bare floor. As the wind shook the branches of the elm tree, the swords seemed to creep toward Chip.

There was a small, odd-looking stove in the corner of the room. It looked spooky in the gleaming moonlight, even spookier than when Chip had first toured the house.

Funny place for a stove.

At Chip's side, Al nervously exhaled a lungful of cigarette smoke. The foul smell of the smoke mingled with the smell of sweat and some other odor Chip couldn't identify.

Then the wooden window shutter banged noisily against the side of the house again and Chip heard a scampering sound behind him. He spun around, raising the tire iron as he turned and saw a pair of bright eyes coming toward him, bright eyes gleaming in the moonlight, scurrying across the bare wooden floor a foot or so off the ground.

Maggie!

She meowed mournfully as she rubbed against his leg, then glanced nervously at the bathroom door, where the large footprints in the dust disappeared. A spindly spider was slowly making its way across the closed door, but a loud crash sent it scuttling away into deep shadows.

The crash came from inside the bathroom.

Chapter 5

Every molecule in Chip's body told him to flee. It wasn't worth dying because Al had called him a chicken. Better to be a live chicken than a dead duck.

But Al had a different idea. He pushed Chip toward the bathroom door, clucking like a chicken. Al was using him as a human shield. Chip glared at his brother, feeling his grip around the tire iron tighten, and for a brief moment he was tempted to smash Al right on top of his spiky blond head.

But instead he stepped toward the door, and with a sudden, vicious kick, smashed the bathroom door open. A bloodcurdling cry ripped through his throat — a cry he didn't even recognize as his own, and he dove into the small bathroom, the tire iron high above his head and ready for use.

Another scream erupted and filled the night air, this one from inside the tub. It was too dark to see clearly, but Chip could detect something moving in the tub.

It didn't look human. He could see it just enough to know it was grotesque.

Panicked, Chip swung the tire iron down with all his might.

The tire iron struck the edge of the old iron tub, clanging loudly. The force of the blow jarred the tire iron from his hand.

Inside the bathtub, the thing screamed again.

"Al! Help!" Chip yelled. "It's in the bathtub! The thing's in the bathtub! Heelllp!" Chip frantically searched the bathroom floor, trying to find the tire iron before the thing in the bathtub rose up against him. "Al!"

But there was no reply from Al.

He was gone.

His big, bad brother had run away, leaving Chip to take on this unearthly monster by himself.

Chip's hands landed on the tire iron, and with a frenzied cry he raised it above his head again. "You're dead meat!" he screamed.

"Nooo!" the thing in the tub yelled back. "Please — no!"

A girl's voice.

Chip stood frozen, the tire iron still poised to strike.

"No! Please! I'm trapped in here! Please! Help me! Please don't kill me."

As his eyes adjusted to the dark, Chip realized that the grotesque-looking blurry thing was actually someone thrashing in the tangled shower curtain, trying to get out.

"Help!" came the girl's voice again.

Chip set the tire iron across the toilet and helped the wrapped-up girl out of the tub. As he unwound her, it was like helping a butterfly emerge from a cocoon. Even in the dark, he could see the girl was a knockout! A little bit on the skinny side, but still a knockout. She had a wild mane of auburn hair, and a look of panic in her eyes that was equally out of control. A curious streak of white ran across the top of her head, reflecting what little light there was in the dark bathroom.

Her balance completely thrown off, the girl clambered out of the bathtub. She was wearing tight jeans and a guy's letter jacket.

She looked at Chip with wild eyes. Unusually bright eyes, Chip thought, even in the dim light of the bathroom. She was trembling all over.

Chip realized he had come within inches of bashing her head in with the tire iron. The thought of nearly murdering this beautiful girl made his stomach turn. The realization that he had nearly killed *anyone* left him feeling uneasy.

"Hi," Chip said, awkwardly holding his hand out to the girl. "My name's Chip. Chip Parker."

The girl graciously took his hand, her fingers barely poking out from the long sleeves of the jacket. She let her fingers linger in Chip's for a moment, then withdrew them. "Alicia Norris," she said simply.

For a moment they stood within inches of each other, speechless. The only light in the small room emanated from the moon and its reflection in her dazzling eyes.

"Er… you wanna go in the other room?" Chip asked. The girl nodded meekly and followed Chip into the bedroom.

Chip didn't know why, but he felt instantly at ease with Alicia. They sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor and started chatting as if they were old friends meeting at a coffee shop.

Alicia explained that she'd been walking by the house earlier when she had seen the real estate woman enter the house to open the windows and then leave. She had watched the woman hide the house key on the nail by

the front steps. An hour later — just an hour ago — Alicia had returned and let herself in.

"But *why?"* Chip asked.

Alicia shrugged. "I don't know." Chip could see she wasn't telling him the whole story, but he decided not to push her. After all, they had just met under pretty weird circumstances.

Alicia told Chip about accidentally stepping on Maggie's tail — that was the screech he had heard earlier. She was the one who had been looking out the window at them. It all made sense to Chip now.

Chip surprised himself by starting to talk about the bad dream he had had a couple of hours before. He described the guy in the hood with the knife. Alicia calmly gave him a sympathetic smile. She had suffered a few bad dreams herself, lately, she admitted.

Even though it was probably past two in the morning, Chip felt surprisingly alert. He was enjoying talking to this beautiful girl in the dark. This strange, beautiful girl with the radiant eyes and the white streak in her hair. He was about to ask her about her dreams, when the bedroom door creaked open.

Al walked in.

Chip figured Al had been eavesdropping in the hall. Chip was about to make chicken sounds to tease Al about running away but checked himself in time. He wanted to make a good impression on Alicia, and bickering with his brother wouldn't sound cool.

"Hi, Al," Chip said casually. "This is Alicia, a neighbor from down the street."

"Hi," Al said. "I'm Al. Chip's good-looking older brother."

Alicia grinned. "Hello."

The shutter slammed and the three teens gasped in unison. Al whipped his switchblade out and clicked it open, glancing at Alicia as he did so. Chip knew he was showing off. Then Al went to the window, leaned out, and started to unscrew the hinge.

Alicia watched Al try to pry it loose. "That shutter's been driving me crazy for weeks. Banging all night long whenever the wind blows. Sometimes I think I can hear it in my dreams. Especially nights like this when a storm is on the way."

Al loosened a screw and flicked it away. "So what were you doing over here?" Al asked Alicia.

"Just looking around," Alicia said. "I'm sorry for trespassing on your property. I didn't know the place had been sold. I didn't think…" Her voice trailed off.

"You didn't think anyone would be nuts enough to buy this place," Chip said with a sly smile.

"Yeah. At least not so soon…"

Al removed another screw from the rusty hinge. "You obviously don't know Chip's mother."

"Our mother's not afraid of anything," Chip explained.

Al snorted by the window. "That's one way to put it."

"She was kind of a hippie before she met my father and moved to Middleton," Chip explained. "She always wanted to own a big house — she loves to fix things up. But we've never had a lot of money. When she saw the rock-bottom price on this one, she jumped at it."

"I'll bet." Alicia's laugh was short.

"She also found a small shop with a low rent right off Main Street. She wants to make it a doughnut shop. She grew up in Springwood, and Al was born here. My mom was pregnant with me when we moved to Middleton." Chip realized he was rambling and decided to cut his story short. "Tomorrow's my mom's first day at the new shop."

"Cool," Alicia said.

"I guess it's cool, if you like doughnuts," Al said. "She'll go bankrupt in a month. She should have just taken Dad's insurance money and had a big party. That's what I would've done."

"Insurance money?" Alicia asked.

"Our dad just died," Chip said.

"Oh… I'm sorry," Alicia said.

"Chip's dad," Al said curtly.

"Al's adopted. He doesn't really consider us his family," Chip said bluntly. "Right, Al?"

"That's right," Al said. His head was still sticking out the window. He grunted as he tried to yank the shutter loose. "Hey Chip, why don't you tell her who your real father is?"

Alicia gave Chip a quizzical look.

"Kind of an inside joke," Chip told her, hoping Al would let it go.

"My dad died when I was little," Alicia told Chip. "From a stroke."

Chip nodded.

"I guess you guys heard what happened here," Alicia said.

"The real estate woman told us," Chip said. "Did you know them — the ones who… died?"

Alicia nodded.

"Bummer," Chip said.

Al stuck his head back in the room, breathing heavily. "That kid — the one they called Weird Evan Walker — stuffed them in the boiler downstairs before hanging himself, didn't he?" The moonlight glistened off Al's teeth as he flashed a wicked smile. "Hey, Chip, better remember to clean out the boiler tomorrow morning."

"I think the police got all that stuff," Alicia said, briskly rubbing the arms of the oversized letter jacket to warm herself.

"But that's what the kid did, right?" Al asked again. "Stuffed them in the boiler."

"Something like that," Alicia said in a soft voice.

"You must have known the boy who did it, right? He was your neighbor," Al persisted.

Alicia suddenly broke down in tears, heavy sobs wracking her slender body. Before Chip realized what he was doing he had slid across the floor and wrapped his arms around her. She dropped her head onto Chip's shoulder as she cried. Chip stroked the back of her head, smoothing her hair, hoping to comfort her.

Chip heard Al making loud smacking noises and looked up. Al smirked, then made gross little silent kisses with his mouth.

Chip looked away.

"It was horrible," Alicia said, trembling in Chip's arms.

"If you don't want to talk about it, that's cool," Chip said softly, pushing a strand of white hair out of her eyes.

Al sniggered from where he stood by the window. "So I guess you knew him."

"Hey, Al — why don't you just jump out that window," Chip said, growing angry.

With a fierce yank, Al finally ripped the shutter loose. He pulled the weathered chunk of wood inside the window and examined it carefully. "How many people did he kill again?"

"Al!" Chip shot his brother a warning glance. "She doesn't want to talk about it!"

Al jammed the knifepoint into the rotten wood.

Alicia breathed deeply, a visible effort to calm herself. She wiped away her tears. "It was horrible." Chip felt a shudder run through her upper body.

Al pulled the point of the blade out of the shutter and started to whittle the wood. "So why were you snooping around here like Nancy Drew? Looking for clues?" he asked.

Chip turned calmly to Alicia. "Just ignore him."

"No, it's okay. I owe you an explanation. I guess… I was looking for clues, sort of. Some kind of answers. This is the first time I've been back here since… since it all happened… Oh, wow," Alicia said, her head swaying back and forth as if her neck muscles had suddenly given out. Then her head fell heavily onto Chip's shoulder.

Alicia had fainted.

Chapter 6

Chip pulled off his denim jacket and arranged it on the floor for a pillow. He lowered Alicia down gently, being especially careful with her head. He knew her brain needed oxygen, and laying her down was the best way to get the blood circulating. He was struck by how peaceful she looked, lying there in the moonlight.

As peaceful as a corpse.

"What's her problem?" Al asked nonchalantly.

"She passed out," Chip said. "All your idiot talk about the murders upset her."

Al continued to carve the wooden shutter, his pale blue eyes gleaming over the sheen of the knife blade. "So what should we do with her?" Al asked.

The tone of Al's question sent a chill through Chip. He looked down at Alicia. She appeared to be breathing normally. He could barely take his eyes off her lovely face.

Sleeping beauty.

If he kissed her, would she wake up?

A clicking sound brought Chip back to reality. Al was in the bathroom flicking the light switch on and off.

"I tried it already," Chip said. "There's no electricity."

"Mom said the real estate lady was supposed to turn everything on," Al complained, still flicking the light switch.

"There's probably a fuse box down in the basement. Why don't you go take a look?" Chip wanted to be alone with Alicia. But Al must have sensed Chip's desire. As usual, big brother wasn't going to let Chip get what he wanted.

"Why don't *you* go?" Al suggested with a sneer.

"I've got to stay with her," Chip said, nodding toward Alicia, who was beginning to stir.

Her eyes flashed open suddenly, filled with terror, her whole face contorted. For a moment Chip thought she might scream, but then she realized where she was and her features softened again.

"What happened?" Alicia asked in a barely audible voice.

"You passed out," Al said, casually.

"Are you all right?" Chip asked.

Alicia nodded and started to sit up. Then she glanced at Al's switchblade stuck in the rotted shutter. The moonlight glinted off the red dragon on the handle. Chip thought he could see its reflection in her eyes.

…a red dragon…

Something deep in his subconscious was stirred, but he couldn't identify it. The dragon, the red. Something.

Then, before he could pinpoint a connection, he felt a sudden dead weight against his arm as Alicia fell back into a faint.

Chapter 7

Alicia's head was spinning, her thoughts whirling about as if caught up in a tornado. Time became meaningless and in an instant she remembered everything she had tried so hard to forget.

The hit-and-run. Her resultant blindness. The total destruction of Scott's face and an abrupt end to their relationship. Then there had been Evan. Evan, the nerd. The kid everybody loved to hate, but he was the sensitive one who became her total support system.

Things had been the worst they could possibly be. Until everything else had gone wrong, too. Another hit-and-run killed Tiffany and crippled Boomer. Then Ellen had disappeared.

Alicia marveled that she had agreed so readily to the eye surgery offered by Evan's uncle. The man was weird — weirder than Evan. But Alicia had been desperate, and the surgery was convenient. Same day, right next door.

The basement turned out to be more than she had bargained for, though. Not exactly sterile. Something apparently had worked, though, because she woke up able to see again.

But it was no prize when the first thing she saw was Ellen and Tiffany squished into the boiler, feet first, heads last, eyes gouged out of their sockets. Evan was nearby, hanging from some rusty pipes, a noose around his neck. His eyeballs were out, too.

The police assumed that Evan had killed himself after desecrating the other bodies. Why not? Weird Evan had been a scapegoat all his life. It seemed like a nice, tidy conclusion.

But it wasn't nice and tidy, Alicia knew.

Murder seldom was.

Fragments of truth stepped forward in Alicia's memory. Dr. Hawke was leaning over her… only it wasn't Dr. Hawke. It was someone else — *something* else — inhuman, evil beyond words…

Alicia felt a sweeping wave of nausea make its way from her toes up to the top of her head, as the dark, familiar fear gripped her heart and soul with its icy hand.

Chapter 8

Chip again supported Alicia by the shoulders and head and lowered her to the floor.

"Is this chick for real?" Al asked, making no move to help Chip. "What's with the fainting bit?"

Alicia was out for only a moment this time. When her eyes opened again, Chip helped her over to the window seat, hoping some fresh air would help revive her.

Alicia was shaking all over. "Where did you get that knife?" she asked Al.

"What's it to you?" Al asked, crossing to where the knife was stuck in the chunk of wood.

"Just curious."

"It's some stupid brotherhood Al's in," Chip said. "All the gang members carry red dragon knives."

Al pulled the knife from the board, closed the blade, and stuck it back in his pocket. He returned to the bathroom then and started playing around with the squeaky bathroom faucets. Chip assumed his brother was hanging around just to annoy him.

"Why don't you make yourself useful and see if you can find the fuse box?" Chip asked his brother when he came back out.

Al ignored Chip. He was standing in front of the stove now. "What is this thing?" he asked Alicia.

"It's an old wood-burning stove," Alicia said. "A lot of the old houses around here have them. They come in handy on chilly nights."

"What about this thing?" Al asked, kicking an old radiator that was against the side wall. "Doesn't it work?"

"Probably. But a wood stove's cozier, I guess," Alicia said with a shrug.

"Maybe we should start it up," Chip suggested to Alicia, briskly rubbing his hands together for warmth. "Do you really think it works? It looks like it dates back to the Civil War." He examined it more closely in what little light was available. It was rusty, with a metal bird attached to a

handle that lifted a trapdoor on top. In its talons the bird — it looked like an eagle, or a hawk — clutched a small animal.

"I think this was Evan's room," Alicia said. "Evan used to keep a bunch of cats here. I think I can still smell them."

"Once the windows are open for a while that stuff will air out," Chip said.

"I hope so for your sake," Al said. "Because this is going to be your room."

Chip shrugged. "No problem. I guess that leaves the one on the other end of the hallway for you. Mom's taking the big one downstairs."

Al walked to the door, flicking his Bic lighter before exiting. "Friggin' Addams family house," he muttered as he disappeared down the long hallway. The glow from the Bic lighter dimmed and the hall was black again.

"Your brother seems a little crazy," Alicia said. She seemed more at ease now that Al was gone.

"This place has him spooked. He's really not so tough. Most of his courage is borrowed from his 'blood brothers. »

"Who are they?"

"The red dragons — like the knife. Brotherhood stuff."

Alicia started pacing the room aimlessly.

"What's wrong?" Chip asked.

"I know a guy who used to carry a knife that looked just like the one your brother has. A switchblade with a red dragon on it."

Chip was silent for a moment. "Then I guess you've met one of his 'brothers, " he said simply. "Al says they have members all over the state."

Chip couldn't imagine why Alicia was so upset over a gang of juvenile delinquents after what her own neighborhood had been through recently.

Chip turned to the potbellied stove as Alicia continued to pace. He opened the rusty trapdoor on top and peered inside. "I keep expecting something to jump out of this thing. A skeleton or something," he joked, trying to relieve some of Alicia's tension.

But Alicia wasn't so easily distracted. She kept pacing back and forth, back and forth, like a caged jungle cat, until it seemed she wasn't even aware of her surroundings anymore. He watched her warily, then saw her stumble and rushed over to keep her from falling.

The girl was trembling again.

"Sorry," Alicia said in a barely audible voice. "I… haven't been myself lately."

Chip walked her back to the window seat.

"Do you want me to take you home?" he asked, hoping she would say no. She could faint all she wanted to into his arms.

"No. It's okay. I'll just sit here a minute. And try… not to think."

And try *not* to think. Chip shot her a puzzled look. He made sure she was all right, then went back to the stove. He creaked open the rectangular metal door at the top again and peered in, not quite knowing what he expected to find. Bones, maybe? A partially cremated body or something equally gruesome?

Instead he saw what looked like pieces of burnt wood. "I think someone's used this recently," Chip told Alicia, who was staring out the window. "I can see some wood scraps down in there."

At least I hope it's wood, he thought.

Chip spotted a large box of wooden kitchen matches beneath the stubby metal legs of the stove, next to a small stack of old newspapers. He balled up several sections of the newspaper and crammed them into the stove. Then he looked around the room for some other fuel. He spotted the chunk of wood Al had been whittling and retrieved it.

Al had carved the shape of a crude dragon.

Chip broke up the rotting wood with his foot and stuck the pieces down inside the stove. Then he lit the kindling with one of the kitchen matches.

A blaze erupted of such ferocity that it sent Chip staggering backward.

Then the entire house shook with a monstrous clank.

Chapter 9

"What the hell was that?" Chip asked.

The whole house was still trembling.

Alicia had instantly leapt from the window seat and rushed to Chip's side. They held onto each other now, waiting for whatever might happen next.

Suddenly, steam erupted from the far wall.

Alicia began to laugh. "Oh my God — it's just the radiator. Your brother must have turned on the water valve downstairs. It's steam coming up through the pipes."

Chip breathed a sigh of relief. "It scared me to death."

"Me, too," agreed Alicia.

More steam clanked up through the old water pipes, making a terrible racket, as the radiator began to hiss with life.

Chip noticed that she made no attempt to step out of their embrace. As she looked up to him expectantly, he kissed her, gently, on the lips. He felt her body relax in his arms.

"I guess that did it!" Al's voice suddenly filled the room, small but penetrating. Alicia jumped back, out of Chip's arms. Silently, Chip cursed his brother. He spun around, expecting to see Al's familiar smirk.

But Al wasn't there.

Where had his brother's voice come from?

"Check the lights!" Al's voice came again from the corner of the room.

Chip walked to that corner and found an air vent.

"Did you hear me?" came Al's voice through the vent. "Check the lights!"

"Gotcha," Chip shouted back down.

Alicia crossed the room to the bedroom light switch. She flicked it up and down but nothing happened.

"Keep trying!" Chip shouted down to his brother.

Alicia walked over to the stove to warm herself. Chip joined her there.

"I guess you and your brother will be transferring to Springwood High," Alicia said. Tongues of flame licked up through the open trapdoor of the stove, making her eyes glow with an eerie brightness.

"Yeah," Chip said. "Do you go there?"

"Not anymore."

"Graduate?" Chip asked, wondering if she was older than he was.

"I dropped out."

"Oh…" Chip was silent for a moment, hoping Alicia would tell him more. He was afraid to push her too much, lest she faint again.

"I might still finish. I don't know. I've already got an art scholarship, so I can go to art school if — when I graduate. Painting used to be about the most important thing in my life. But now… it seems so pointless. Everything does."

"Why?" Chip asked.

Alicia's features tightened. "It just does," she said flatly.

Chip decided to change the subject away from her. "Al and I are both seniors. Al's a year older, but he flunked a grade. He thinks he's going to play pro football someday, so classes don't matter. I told him he still has to study if he wants to get into college — the pros don't draft kids out of high school. But Al doesn't listen. He doesn't listen to anyone except Al — and maybe his *blood brothers."*

"So I take it your brother is going to play for Springwood."

"We both are — I hope. Our coach at Middleton arranged tryouts for us. The only problem is that both Al and I want to play quarterback. Al can play defense, too. He was all-conference at Middleton as a free safety, but he says quarterbacks make the top money in the pros. Is Scott Martin still your quarterback?"

"No," Alicia answered in a tiny voice.

Chip could barely hear her over the fluttering flames emanating from the stove top. "What happened? Is he injured?"

The wind began to howl, rattling the window.

"Yes," Alicia said in a tight voice. "I don't think he'll be playing again very soon…"

Inside the cast-iron potbellied stove, the fire crackled and popped.

A hiss of steam rumbled up through the radiator.

"That's too bad."

Alicia was staring into the fire, the light dancing off a smattering of light freckles over the bridge of her nose. Chip moved till he was standing behind her and wrapped his arms around her. She turned and raised her face toward his. Chip brushed a strand of Alicia's odd-looking white hair away

from her eyes, her lovely, sparkling vulnerable eyes, and looked deep into them.

As he pressed his lips against hers he saw someone out of the corner of his eye.

Someone in the hallway staring at him from out of the darkness.

Then the room exploded in a burst of white light!

Chapter 10

Alicia uttered a cry of dismay. Both she and Chip covered their eyes.

"I found the fuse box," Al said casually as he stepped into the room. Al felt a brief surge of admiration for Chip. One minute he's about to bash this babe's brains in, the next he's swapping spit with her.

"I guess those weird stories I heard about Elm Street can't all be true," Al finally said with a smirk. "The neighbors around here actually seem to be quite friendly so far."

A few minutes later, Al watched from the bedroom window as Chip walked the girl home. He watched them disappear up Elm Street, disappear into the gloom.

Gee, I hope I didn't spoil their fun, he chuckled to himself.

And then he saw someone run out of the shadows and into his yard, heading for the back.

Someone wearing a hooded sweatshirt.

Al ran down the stairs and peered out the kitchen window, hoping to get a closer look at the trespasser. If the neighborhood kids thought they were going to use his new home as a fun house, they were sadly mistaken. He didn't care how many people had been murdered in this house. He was living here now, and anyone who tried to mess around with him would soon learn the hard way that it wasn't a good idea.

No one messed with Big Al.

Al spotted the figure, opened the kitchen door, and ran out into the back yard. "Yo!" he yelled to the figure who took off in a sprint. He ran all the way to the back fence, a rickety, wooden, white picket fence, and leapt over it.

"Yo — I'm talking to you!" Al yelled again louder. "Come back here, you little punk!"

The hooded figure turned to face Al. The guy looked pretty big. Almost as big as Al. The light from the moon glowed off his face, framing it eerily in a silver beam, and Al felt a twitch in his memory. Then the hooded figure disappeared into the murk.

That face… he knew that face.

It took only a moment for Al to remember where he had seen the boy before. He smiled. He wasn't going to be alone in Springwood after all. He'd found a brother…

"Wait!" Al yelled, running after the hooded figure through a backyard grown wild with tall grass and unruly weeds. Dead wet leaves stuck to his shoes. He hurdled the back fence and ran across a short clearing, until he came to the edge of a stretch of woods that suddenly towered in front of him like a big, black animal.

Up a dark, twisting path that ran through the woods, Al heard footsteps thudding away.

Al stared up the path for a long moment.

It was so dark — darker than any woods he had ever seen before.

Al pulled a flashlight he'd found in the basement from his back pocket and flicked it on. He followed the cone of light through the thick woods, trampling over a path covered with brown leaves and fragrant pine needles. He kept going, and it wasn't long before the path led out of the woods.

Into a cemetery.

Al stopped short, and nearly fell on a dewy patch of grass.

This was a little more than he had bargained for…

Tombstones of different heights rose in not so neat rows from the ground like broken rotting teeth.

There was no sign of the hooded figure.

The full moon floated in front of him as if leading the way.

He thought of turning back, but decided to push on. He wouldn't do this for just anyone.

Only for a brother.

There were certain allegiances you had to honor, and the brotherhood was one of them, or else you were alone.

All alone.

And Al had felt so alone all his life.

The warmth and the attention and the love had all gone to Chip.

Al walked past the half-opened rusty gate that said elm street cemetery, up the gently sloping hill, looking for his brother.

And found him.

The dark, hooded figure stood before a gravestone silhouetted by a giant golden moon. Loose leaves swirled about his feet as a sudden rush of wind whistled through the cemetery.

Al silently approached the hooded figure. The enigmatic form was running his hand along the cool granite of a newly set gravestone.

Al peered past the hooded figure, curious to see the name on the tombstone.

Ellen Sawyer.

"Brother…" Al started to say.

But a gust of wind blew the word back into his face. The wind whipped up, suddenly fierce, causing dirt from the grave to blow in his direction. Al raised his hand to shield himself.

Then the hooded figure turned slowly and looked at Al with eyes that burned bright red.

As red and as bright and as hot as the breath of a dragon.

Chapter 11

Chip dragged his futon up the stairs, down the dusty hallway, and into his new bedroom. He flopped it onto the floor next to the cast-iron stove.

It seemed like a cozy place to crash.

The stove still gave off heat, though the fire had long since gone out. Chip peered in at the orange coals still glowing brightly. Then he shut the trapdoor on top of the stove, lay down on the futon, and closed his eyes.

He was totally worn out from unloading the van.

Al had disappeared again. He hadn't been at the house when Chip returned from walking Alicia home, so Chip had unloaded most of the stuff from the van himself. At first he was just pissed that Al had left all the work for him. After an hour had passed, though, it crossed his mind that maybe he should be worried.

He didn't let the worry consume him. It was entirely possible that Al was hiding someplace to avoid having to help.

Chip closed his eyes and felt a cool breeze wash over him as he lay on the futon. He opened his eyes and realized he had left his bedroom door open. But he was too tired to get up and close it. Might as well leave it open anyway in case Maggie wanted to get in.

Where had that crazy cat gone, anyway? Probably someplace in the house exploring.

Chip closed his eyes again and thought of Alicia. What a babe. And what a kisser. He couldn't believe how lucky he was to meet such a gorgeous girl his first night in Springwood.

And under such unusual circumstances.

Life is so strange, Chip thought, as his eyelids grew heavy and he drifted off into sleep.

The metal trapdoor on top of the stove — popped open with a loud *clunk.*

Chip opened his eyes. He smelled something foul.

An eerie red mist snaked out through the opening of the stove. Like a rope, it coiled around an exposed beam in the ceiling. At the end of the rope hung a noose and the noose was looped around the neck of a teenage boy. His neck was twisted at an impossible angle, long slender fingers dangling

lifelessly at his side like useless meat hooks. Behind his thick-lensed, black-framed glasses were empty eye sockets.

The smoke ghost drifted across the floor and hovered in one corner of the room, pointing a bony red smoke finger first at Chip, then down at the floor, flames from his fingertips hitting the floor like blowtorches of amazing accuracy.

Chip recognized the form now — it was Evan Walker.

He wants me to go into the basement, he thought with horror. *Where the murders took place.*

But Chip couldn't move, no matter what. Every muscle in his body was petrified.

Then the hideous creature began his approach.

Chapter 12

"Aaaaugghhhh!"

Chip bolted upright in his bed, his heart thundering inside his chest.

Who screamed?

Breathless, he gasped for air, his mind whirling with horror-filled thoughts.

He had heard it even in his dream. Like the screech of a dying cat.

The thing in the stove — red ghostly monster — no eyeballs — hands like meat hooks — incongruous glasses — fingers like fire daggers pointing — awful screams — and screams again.

Who had screamed?

He glanced at the wood-burning stove, still glowing, warm and friendly.

And then he knew.

He had screamed.

It was a nightmare.

Another nightmare. This one about a gross, eyeless dude wearing big nerdy glasses.

Dazed, Chip rose from the futon and stood in front of the stove. With a trembling hand he lifted the top trapdoor and peered inside. Nothing. No ghosts. No demons. No hideous red smoky monster faces with empty eye sockets.

Just warm glowing embers, almost out now, though the stove seemed to radiate more heat than before.

Chip's body was soaked in sweat.

Hot, nervous sweat.

Over a stupid nightmare.

Chip looked at the glowing numbers of his digital clock plugged in at the far wall. Almost four in the morning.

The first bad dream had come just a little past midnight. Now another one four hours later. At this rate he would be dead from fright before the weekend was over.

His first night on Elm Street.

The floorboard creaked in the dark hallway right outside his bedroom door.

Chip swiveled his head and saw the black silhouette of a hooded figure standing in the gloom. Staring at him.

Chip fought to remain calm. "I know it's you, Al, so you can come out. Either come out or close the door — you're letting all the heat out."

Soft laughter, then Al walked into the room.

"Another bad dream, bro'?" Al asked. "Bummer." Al's face took on the familiar smirk.

Chip felt the urge to rip that smirk off and shove it down into the stove once and for all. He wanted to burn it to ashes. Take Al's entire head, maybe, smirk and all, and rub it into the hot coals glowing inside the stove's belly until Al screamed for mercy. And then he would rub even harder.

Al played with the strings of his hood. "If you think maybe you could go the rest of the night without screaming the roof off the house I might be able to get some sleep. Or should I sit by your bed and *hold your hand* to keep the bogeyman away. You want the lights on?" Al started flicking the bedroom lights on and off.

Finally, Al got tired of his own game and left. The room seemed colder now. Chip got up and walked over to the stove to see if he could poke some more life out of the fire.

But it wasn't necessary.

Somehow the fire had rekindled itself.

And the flames were dancing high and lively.

Chapter 13

Saturday afternoon.

Chip slept until noon, when the sunlight that had been working its way across the room finally hit him full in the face.

He yawned and sat on the edge of his futon, still groggy from interrupted sleep. His eyes felt puffy, his mind fuzzy, his head wooden. But at least he had made it through the night without a third nightmare.

His stomach grumbled hungrily. He hoped there was something in the fridge to eat. Maybe his mom had stopped at the 7-Eleven on the way home for some groceries.

Chip chuckled to himself. Did they even have a fridge? He couldn't remember if the previous tenant was supposed to leave one behind.

He stood up, crossed to the window, and looked out. It was a bright, sunny day, but the grass looked wet and there were puddles in the street. He must have slept right through a storm.

Chip pulled some gray sweats out of his duffel bag and got dressed. Maybe later he'd get out and throw the ball around with Al.

As he laced up his Nikes, he noticed how dingy and bare his bedroom walls looked. The floor was greasy and the room still smelled of cat.

"Maggie?" Where had Maggie run off to? He hadn't seen her since last night.

Chip tacked his football posters up on the wall. His favorite was a life-size shot of Bernie Kosar, when Kosar was with the Cleveland Browns. He stood back to admire it. Kosar was a great quarterback — Chip thought he actually looked a little bit like him.

Chip noticed a thin diagonal crack along the wall, and moved the poster over to cover it. Perfect.

Suddenly he slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. Alicia! Last night when he had walked her home, she had said she would come over today to help with the cleaning. Had she been over already?

Of course, she did live practically next door. He could go over to her house if he'd missed her.

Out of curiosity, Chip ran down the stairs and out onto the front porch.

There was no doorbell.

Just an old fashioned knocker on the door in the shape of a beady-eyed hawk. Identical to the bird on the handle of the cast-iron stove.

Chip knocked lightly on his mother's bedroom door. No answer. Maybe she had gone to work already. He glanced out the kitchen window to see if her station wagon was still in the driveway.

Nope. Just Al's van. Chip climbed back up the stairs.

As he passed Al's bedroom he heard a long, low moan.

Chip placed his ear against the door to hear better.

The moaning grew louder.

He knocked on Al's door. "Al?" No answer, then a loud gasp of pain.

"Al!" Chip twisted the door knob with a sweaty palm and swung the door open.

Al was sprawled out on top of the bed, half covered by just a sheet. His body was wet with perspiration. His face was beet red and filled with terror.

"No!" Al bellowed in his sleep. "He can't be! It was all a joke! I was only joking! Noooo!" His features contorted into a gruesome mask of revulsion.

And then Al suddenly rose from the bed and came at Chip like a lunatic caught in a trance. Before Chip knew what was happening, Al had his meaty hands around his neck.

Chip tried to pry his brother's hold loose as he realized he couldn't get any air. He slapped his brother in the face as hard as he could, but Al's grip only tightened.

"Al!" Chip croaked hoarsely as Al's steel-like fingers bit into the skin of his throat.

Al was strangling him to death!

Chapter 14

Chip slapped his brother again with what little strength he had left.

Al's eyes finally snapped into focus and he immediately let go of Chip. "What happened?" he asked groggily.

"You were walking in your sleep again," Chip rasped, rubbing his neck. He cleared his throat.

"Oh…" Al said, still in a stupor. Wearing only a pair of oversized boxer shorts, Al trudged back over to his bed and sat down.

"Man, and you make fun of me for my bad dreams," Chip said.

Al looked at Chip as if seeing him for the first time. Then he grinned. "You know what I always kid you about?"

"You mean about who my *real* father is?" Chip asked, his eyes wide with mock horror.

"Yeah. That's what I was dreaming about." Al chuckled. "Man — I'm freaking myself out."

"Did you see Mom this morning?" Chip asked his brother.

"Does it look like I saw her?" Al asked grumpily, running his hands through his spiky blond hair. He patted his hard abdominals. "You want to pump iron later?"

"Maybe," Chip said. "The movers are coming later. Are you going to be here?"

"I don't know," Al mumbled vaguely.

"And Alicia might stop by."

"Who?"

"The girl from last night."

Al smiled wickedly. "Nice going, buddy boy. You move fast. How far did you get with her?"

Chip felt his face turn red. "Far enough, I guess," he answered vaguely.

Al smirked. "I really dig that white streak in her hair. Like the bride of Frankenstein or something."

"You should talk," Chip said. "Your hair isn't exactly humanoid."

Al spiked up his blond hair where — it had been crushed flat on the pillow.

"So do you have any idea where Mom might be?" Chip asked.

"Try the basement. She said something about cleaning out the furnace."

"Okay," Chip said. "Later."

Chip made his way back down the stairs, through the kitchen, and to the door that led to the basement. He didn't expect to find his mother there. Her car wasn't out front.

He opened the door and leaned down the basement stairs. "Mom?" he called down.

No answer.

"Mom?" he called again. She had probably gone to work at the doughnut shop.

Still, Chip decided to investigate further, and besides, he was curious what the basement looked like. They had forgotten to check it out before they had bought the house. A bad thing to forget, Chip realized, considering the history of the house.

Get a grip, he ordered himself. He wouldn't let some wild stories and a few nightmares freak him out.

Chip flicked on the light switch. A single naked lightbulb at the bottom of the stairs glimmered weakly, as if struggling for life, then suddenly went out with a loud pop.

Chip sprang back, startled, then felt foolish for being so jumpy. He made a mental note to buy more lightbulbs as he walked down the basement stairs.

The basement was dimly lit by the little bit of sunlight that found its way in through a grimy rectangular basement window. Most of Al's barbells and weight-lifting equipment had already landed in one corner. The other end of the basement was partitioned off by a wooden wall that had two doors built into it, side by side. Chip felt himself getting spooked again.

A bit of light shone from under one of the doors. Al had probably left it on by mistake the night before. It was probably the furnace room. He walked to the door and listened for any sound from the other side, but he heard nothing.

"Mom?" he called out, even though he knew his mother wasn't in there.

Chip put his hand on the doorknob and turned it slowly till he heard it click. He gave the door a soft push and stood still as the door swung gently away from him.

The door opened slowly, gradually revealing more and more of the room. At first Chip thought the walls were painted dark red. Strange choice of color for a basement, he thought.

It took just a little more light for Chip to realize that it wasn't red paint after all. It looked like a slaughterhouse. The walls of the basement were splashed from ceiling to floor with blood.

Chapter 15

It was a sight suggestive of such grisly brutality that Chip's stomach lurched, and he thought he would be sick.

He was glad he hadn't eaten breakfast yet.

The blood was dry. He didn't need to touch it to know that. But wouldn't the real estate people have handled something like this?

Maybe they couldn't face it.

He felt increasingly dizzy. He put a hand on the door frame to steady himself.

This must be where it had happened. But why all the blood? Hadn't the girls been burned in the furnace? Something pretty gruesome must have happened before their bodies had been stuffed into the flames.

Maybe Alicia would know.

Chip's dizziness grew worse, and he sat down in what could only be an old dentist's chair. *This must be old Dr. Hawke's office,* Chip realized. Straps hung down off either side of the chair. The examination chair, Chip thought to himself. But why would it need straps?

There were knobs and levers on the back of the chair. Chip pulled a lever and the back of the chair suddenly flopped down flat like an operating table. Maybe Hawke performed eye surgery in this chair, and the straps were to keep the patient from moving around.

Hardly the most sterile conditions he'd ever witnessed.

He yanked the lever in the opposite direction and the chair righted itself.

Chip thought he heard someone call his name. It was so soft, he couldn't know who it was.

"Down here!" he called back, leaving the chair. He flicked the light off on his way out and shut the door behind him. He'd let Al clean out that room.

As Chip crossed the dimly lit basement he saw a long, distorted shadow moving down the basement stairs. He looked up and saw a hooded figure three steps down.

Chip froze.

"Chip? Are you down there?"

It was Alicia's voice. Chip's mood suddenly improved a thousandfold, and he dashed up the stairs two at a time. At the top of the stairs Alicia was tugging her hood off and shaking out her mane of wild, auburn hair. He noticed that her white streak was gone.

"Hi," Alicia said cheerfully. "I thought I saw a light on down here."

"Hi," Chip said. For a moment he felt awkward, standing so close to her on the stairs, not quite sure how to act. Then without thinking about it he ran his fingers gently through her hair where the white streak had been. Her hair felt like silk and smelled lemony fresh. "What happened to your streak?"

"Oh," Alicia said shyly. "I dyed it this morning."

Chip wanted to ask her if the streak had been some sort of fashion statement, but thought better of it.

"Such beautiful eyes," Chip said softly, not even aware the words were coming out of his mouth.

Alicia moved closer to him.

When he had walked her home the night before, Alicia had been eager for a good-night kiss. As if she was starving for love. And Chip had been more than willing. He liked bold girls who let him know what they wanted. Especially when they both wanted the same thing.

"I missed you," Alicia said in a sexy voice that sent a shiver of excitement through him. Chip noticed that she had on a little more makeup than she'd had on the night before.

Alicia moved closer to him. Chip closed his eyes and felt the magic touch of her soft, warm lips.

Suddenly Alicia stiffened and pulled back. Chip opened his eyes in surprise and saw the meaty hand on Alicia's shoulder.

Al.

"Hi," Al said with a lopsided grin.

Al was dressed in sweats. The wide leather belt he always wore when lifting weights was strapped around his waist. He pumped iron almost every day and loved showing off his muscles.

"Hi," Alicia said in a quiet voice.

"You wanna body build with me?" Al asked Alicia with a straight face.

Alicia gave him a small smile. "No, thanks."

She looked back at Chip, and he could see her nervousness. A lot of girls found Al's tough act alluring, but Alicia was obviously not one of

them.

"So, what are you two lovebirds up to?" Al asked, languidly scratching his chest through his sweatshirt.

"I promised Chip I'd help with the housecleaning," Alicia said.

"Good! You can start with my room," Al suggested. "It smells like a cat died in there."

"Probably your dirty socks…" Chip began, then he remembered Maggie. "Hey, have you seen Maggie? I think she might have run off."

"Can you blame her?" Al cracked. He slid past Alicia, who moved against the wall to avoid touching him, then headed down the basement stairs.

"My brother's not a morning person," Chip explained apologetically.

"It's the middle of the afternoon," Alicia pointed out.

"He's not an afternoon person either," Chip said simply. He heard the clank of metal as Al began his workout.

"So… you want the grand tour of the house?" Chip asked Alicia. "In the daylight this time?"

"Okay," Alicia said, turning on the stairs.

Al suddenly grunted loudly, and then they heard heavy metal thud onto concrete.

"But if you don't mind," Alicia said, "I'll skip the basement."

Chapter 16

They ended up in Chip's bedroom.

Alicia sat on the window seat. Chip sprawled on his futon, hoping that Alicia might join him. But she didn't.

"Al likes to get to people," Chip said. "I guess that's obvious. Don't let him bug you."

"I won't," Alicia said weakly. She suddenly shivered, though the room was warm as toast. She gave Chip an uneasy look. "Sorry I'm turning into a drag. Being in this place again just… I don't know… gives me the creeps. I keep hoping I'll get over it. But…" Her voice trailed off.

"You'll get used to it after a while," Chip said. He hoped *he'd* get used to it, too.

Alicia swallowed hard. "I don't know about that. I had some friends…" Her lower lip began to tremble. Her hands were clenched at her sides.

"Don't talk about it," Chip said with concern. "You need to take it easy. You shouldn't relive this stuff on my account."

"No — it's okay," Alicia said, trying to calm herself. "I want to talk about it." She choked back a sob, then started again. "I… I had… some friends…" Her voice trailed off. She was looking down at her feet now.

"The ones who were killed?" Chip asked tentatively.

Alicia nodded. "It was horrible… a nightmare — " She stopped midsentence as the bedroom door creaked open.

Chip turned to see who was there, expecting Al or his mother, but there was no one.

Still, the door continued to move as if pushed by an invisible, ghostly hand.

Both stared at the door expectantly.

"Maggie!" Chip exclaimed as the black cat darted in and made a beeline to Chip. "Where have you been, girl?" Chip asked, roughing up her fur and scratching her behind the ears.

"This is Maggie," Chip told Alicia. "I think you sort of met her last night."

"Hi, Maggie," Alicia said softly. "Sorry for stepping on your tail."

The cat looked up at her with curious green eyes.

"Did I tell you that Evan — the boy who used to live here — collected stray cats?" Alicia asked.

"Yeah, you did. Last night when I was walking you home."

"He must've had dozens of them."

"Why?" Chip asked.

Alicia shrugged. "They were his friends, I guess. His only friends." She paused. "Evan was a strange guy. He wasn't easy to get to know."

"You sound like you knew him pretty well," Chip said.

Again Alicia shrugged. "Better than most, I guess."

"Why… why did he do it?" Chip asked. *Why did Evan murder those girls and stuff them into the furnace?* "Do you know?"

"I don't know that he did," Alicia said.

"But the papers said…"

"The papers don't know everything!" Alicia said angrily, jumping to her feet.

"But *you* do?" Chip asked.

"The only thing the forensic experts could *prove* was that Ellen had been killed by a stab wound that penetrated her brain. In fact, the knife was still in her skull when they found it."

"Awful," Chip said, making a face.

"It was a switchblade with a red dragon design on the handle," Alicia said meaningfully.

It took less than a moment for that information to sink in. "Whoa. Time-out. You don't really think my brother or one of his gang members had anything to do with that girl's murder, do you?" Chip glanced at the bedroom door Maggie had pushed open. He didn't want Al to hear any of this.

Alicia knelt on the edge of the futon now and locked Chip in with her eyes.

"The knife belonged to a kid named Johnny Murphy. And I'm pretty sure Johnny and your brother are in the same gang or brotherhood or whatever you want to call it."

Chip glanced at the door again, then turned back to Alicia. "The Red Dragons are just a bunch of juvenile delinquents. Guys who drink beer and try to act cool and occasionally rip off someone's car to go joyriding in. They're not murderers."

"I think *one* of them is," Alicia said simply.

"You mean… Johnny?"

She nodded.

"So where's Johnny now?" Chip asked. He hoped he didn't live on Elm Street.

"He went crazy. After the police let him go, he kept having nightmares and tried to kill himself, so his family had him committed to a mental hospital."

Nightmares…

Al stepped into the room. Smirking.

"Don't you ever knock?" Chip snapped at his brother.

"I didn't know your friend was still here," Al said, dabbing his eyes with his sleeve. His sweatshirt was covered with dark, sweaty spots and perspiration was streaming down his forehead. "I came up here to see if you wanted to pump iron with me. But I see you're trying to pump something else, so I'll just wish you the best of luck."

"Get lost, Al!" Chip shouted, his temper finally loosed. But Al was already gone.

"What's with him, anyway?" Alicia asked, shaking her head. "Why is he such a creep? It's like a full-time hobby for him."

"I don't know," Chip said, shaking his head in disgust. "He's been worse since Dad died."

"How'd your dad die?" Alicia asked.

"My dad…" Chip was always embarrassed to admit his dad was a janitor. "My dad worked at the school I went to. He was in the basement when a boiler blew up and scalded him to death. Al was the one who found the body."

"Oh, wow. No wonder he's weirded out," Alicia said, her eyes growing wide with disbelief.

"Yeah," Chip said, gloomy at the memory. "He said the steam scalded Dad's face so bad the skin had peeled right off…" Chip's head dropped into his hands, heavy as a cannonball. "Al hated Dad, he hates Mom, and he hates me."

"Why?" Alicia asked.

"Because he's adopted. He thinks my parents favored me. Which I guess they did," Chip admitted. "Or at least my father did. My mom always seemed to be working and wasn't around most of the time. But that's not my

fault. I've always tried to treat Al like a real brother. I guess I've always felt sorry for him."

"Maybe he can sense that and it bugs him," Alicia said. "Or maybe he's just jealous. He'll get over it someday."

"I wish," Chip muttered.

"Does he know who his real parents are?"

"No. But he's always going on about how great his father is anyway. He says his father is better than mine. And he's never even met the guy. I wish someday he *would* meet his father just so he'd shut up about it." Chip had never confided in anyone this way. And now that he had started, it was hard to stop.

"You know what else bugs me about Al?" Chip continued. "He's always going on about how my father isn't my *real* father, because I don't look anything like him and because my mom didn't have any more children after me."

"I'm an only child, too," Alicia reassured him.

"So Al's always going on about how Mom… get this… had an affair with *Freddy Krueger* when she lived in Springwood. He says they were secret lovers. Al found a crime book that had a picture of Krueger in it. He says I look just like the guy."

"Did… you see the picture?" Alicia asked.

"Yeah, I saw it," Chip said.

"And…?"

Chip shrugged. "I guess he did look like me. But so what? Anyway, Al says that moving to Elm Street was fate. That we actually moved here so I could meet my real father."

A soft breeze blew a dead leaf through the open window. It scuttled across the bare wooden floor and stopped at the side of Alicia's sneaker. As if in a daze, Alicia picked it up by the stem.

Then, abruptly, Alicia stood up, and without another word, walked out of the room.

"Alicia? Wait up. What's wrong?" Chip said as he ran after her.

Al came out of his bedroom and stood at the top of the stairs, effectively blocking Chip from going any farther. Chip tried to push Al aside, but Al stood his ground.

"Trouble in paradise?" he said. "Did the lovers have a spat?"

"Get out of my way," Chip yelled, but Alicia was already out the front door.

Chip turned around and went back up to his room. He sat on his futon and noticed Maggie crouched beneath the stove. "Hey, Maggie. What's up?" Chip asked.

The cat meowed softly.

"Alicia's strange," he said to the animal. "Strange as hell."

He fell back in frustration.

Chapter 17

Chip went to bed early that night, but he couldn't sleep.

He couldn't get Alicia off his mind.

He had walked down Elm Street earlier that evening and stopped by her house, but she wasn't home. A woman in a flimsy housedress with curlers in her hair had answered the door.

Alicia's mother. She told him Alicia wasn't home, then slammed the door in his face.

Strange woman.

Strange daughter.

Everything was strange on Elm Street.

Chip lay prone on his futon and tried to empty his mind. He had moved his bed away from the stove, and decided he liked it better that way. He tried to relax, using the little bit of yoga he knew, systematically relaxing muscle after muscle from toes to head until he was about to slip off to sleep.

Then a noise distracted him. A tapping noise. Chip had no patience for this.

"Get out of my room, Al," he yelled as he sat up on the futon. "Now!"

Then he located it. It wasn't Al. It wasn't even human! It stared insanely from behind the stove. It opened the stove door and flames leapt out, licking the thing's face, but it didn't even care.

Chip was numb with fear. He had no weapon, no way to defend himself. He started to kick off his covers, but the hooded figure stepped forward and put his foot down on the end of Chip's blanket.

The face beneath the hood was horribly disfigured. A long, straight gash ran diagonally across from cheek to jaw, and several teeth were missing. One eye hung limply out of its socket. The other eye was filled with malice and hatred, and was staring right at Chip.

Its right hand was a club.

Chip sat frozen in ice-cold sweat, his heart pounding so hard it threatened to explode right through his chest. He opened his mouth to scream, to cry for help, but no sound came out.

Move! Chip willed himself. *Move now or die.* Chip scooted backward across the futon and smacked his head against the wall.

His picture of Bernie Kosar fell off its tack and dropped onto his head.

Chip threw the poster aside and kept trying to move back, despite the wall that blocked him. He smashed his head against it, trying irrationally to knock out a hole through which he could escape. He banged it again and again until the exploding pain in his head forced him to stop and made the room swirl around in dizzying patterns.

When his vision became focused again, the hooded figure had vanished.

For a long moment Chip stared at the open window. A gust of wind blew into the room, and the rain that had threatened to fall earlier that afternoon fell now.

Chip went to the window and looked up and down Elm Street, searching for the hooded figure that had been in his room. But he saw only shadows.

Then behind him, the door creaked open.

Oh no, it's back.

He spun around, his mouth twisted into a silent scream.

Chapter 18

The hooded figure with the club was walking toward Chip. Then it spoke.

"What's your problem, man?" Al asked, still pumping his handheld dumbbell, working up a good sweat.

"Al?"

"What was all that banging?"

Chip suddenly realized his head hurt fiercely. "I banged my head on the wall," he said.

"Smart," said Al. "Like about a hundred times? That's what it sounded like."

"I guess that's why it hurts so bad," Chip said. He gently rubbed the back of his head, but it only made the pain worse.

Al grinned. "Another bad dream?"

Outside, a terrific flash of lightning was followed by a tremendous clap of thunder. Then it started to rain.

Al pumped the dumbbell more vigorously.

"Mom working late?" Chip asked.

Al nodded. "I guess."

Chip wished she were home. If she were, maybe he'd go downstairs and tell her about his nightmares. But then she'd just worry about him — worry she was neglecting him while she got her business going. No, this was something Chip had to work out for himself. He wouldn't admit it out loud, but he was glad that Al was here. Chip knew that if he were ever in really big trouble, Al would stand up for him. They were brothers, after all. "So, what are you up to?" Chip asked, trying to start a conversation.

"About six-four," Al joked.

"For real."

"Nothing. Just working out." Al switched the dumbbell to the other hand. He seemed in no hurry to go.

"Kind of late to be doing that, isn't it?" Chip asked.

"Maybe I was having trouble sleeping, too," Al answered vaguely. "Besides, it's cold in my room, but nice and warm in the basement."

The rain fell harder.

Al's eyes wandered over to the cast-iron stove. "Did you get that thing going yet?"

"Oh, yeah," Chip said. "It works."

The brothers were silent for a moment, just listening to the squeaking and groaning of the rickety old house, as Al kept pumping his dumbbell, switching from hand to hand. The veins at his temples were beginning to poke out from the exertion.

"Did you lock up?" Chip asked his brother.

"Yeah."

Al pumped off three more quick curls with each hand then set the dumbbell on top of the cast-iron stove. He crossed the floor and sprawled his sweaty body out on Chip's futon, and stared up at the ceiling, breathing hard.

Chip was looking out the window again, into the shadows of the old elm tree. A flash of lightning illuminated the yard. There was nobody in sight.

He turned to look at Al. "You wanna get your sweaty body off my clean sheets?"

"Why don't you get some furniture for your room?" Al asked, not moving.

"I like it bare."

"You ready for the tryout on Monday?" Al asked, stretching. The veins in his temples were still pulsing visibly.

"I guess," Chip mumbled.

"I heard Springwood lost again last night. To those chumps from Lafayette, the worst team in their conference. Springwood's got a freshman playing quarterback, some dweeb named Roger Dawson — Roger the Dodger they call him because he won't stay in the passing pocket when the pressure gets heavy." Al gave Chip a devilish grin. "Like you."

"I stay in there long enough to get the job done. And in case you forgot, I led Middleton to more wins last year than you did your first two years."

"Pure luck," Al snorted.

"Yeah, right," Chip shot back.

"Springwood's also got a senior quarterback playing second string," Al continued. "Barney Something-or-other. I hear the guy's a total geek."

"Probably why he's second string," Chip commented. He gave his brother a long look. "So, how do you know all this, bro'? You been scouting the opposition or something?"

Al's face had the expression of a kid's caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "I know a guy from the summer league who plays for Springwood."

"Who?"

"Just someone," Al said evasively. "And that's not all he told me."

"So what else did your secret pal tell you?"

Al didn't answer. Chip wondered if Al was acting mysteriously just to yank him around.

Al fixed Chip with his icy blue eyes. "I'm gonna win that starting quarterback job," he said with quiet intensity. "I'm going to be the number-one guy. At Springwood, and around this neighborhood, too."

"We'll see," Chip said nonchalantly.

"There's no *seeing* about it. I'm gonna be number one. *Número uno.* The straw that stirs the milkshake," Al said with sudden, intense passion that verged on anger. "I know what you've always thought. That you're better than me. Giving me those looks of pity. Well, I've got news for you. It's the other way around. I pity you. I'm top dog around here, and I'm going to prove it."

The rain came down in torrents, lashing the street outside.

Chip felt a shiver run through him. Al's behavior was bizarre, even by Al's standards.

"Hey, Al?" Chip asked. "Are you on something, man?" He tried to look into his brother's eyes to see if the pupils were dilated.

Al flashed Chip a crooked grin, and pointed his finger at Chip as if it were the barrel of a gun.

He flicked his wrist then, as if he were shooting an invisible bullet right into Chip's chest.

Whaaaaa-owwww!

Both boys jumped as a sudden loud wail of pain filled the air.

Chapter 19

"It's coming from the basement. Up through the air vent," Chip said, standing motionless by the window.

"No kidding, Einstein," Al replied sarcastically, staring at the vent.

"Should we call the cops or something?" Chip asked.

"Yeah, we could," Al said, finally moving from his spot on the futon and walking toward the air vent. "If we had a phone."

Chip walked over, got down on his hands and knees, and put his ear to the vent. "There's someone crying down there."

"Crying?" Al asked in disbelief. "Hey, maybe your weird girlfriend came back," Al suggested.

"Why would she be crying in our basement?"

"The same reason she was running around up here last night," Al said. "The chick's nuts. Cute, but nuts."

Chip stood up from the air vent. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Should we go down there?" Chip asked. "Or are you chicken?"

Al glared at his brother. "Who're you calling chicken?"

"You. Chicken. Chicken like the way you ran out on me last night."

"I was just goofing around," Al protested, "trying to freak you out."

Chip shook his head and rolled his eyes. He didn't buy that for a moment. For all his bravado, Chip knew his brother was insecure and easily scared. Chip picked up his jeans and sweater from the window seat and started to put them on.

"You going down?" Al asked.

"I'm not going to hang out up here all night listening to a lot of moaning and groaning." Chip sat on the floor and laced up his sneakers then left the room with Al behind him. He stopped in the kitchen and picked out the biggest, sharpest knife he could find, then he headed for the basement stairs. Al was armed with his dumbbell.

Chip's heart was thudding inside his chest. "You ready?" he whispered to Al over his shoulder.

"Yeah," Al said. "Right behind you."

Yeah, right, Chip thought, *so you can make a quick getaway.*

They crept down the basement stairs. Chip held the knife in front of him.

The door to Dr. Hawke's office was open.

In the eerie red glow cast by the furnace fire, Chip could see someone sitting in the old examination chair with his back to them.

He wore a hood.

Against the opposite wall, outside the office, the rectangular basement window had been shattered, and moonlight ricocheted off the jagged shards of glass.

A savage jet of flame shot out the open boiler door, illuminating the figure sitting in the examination chair.

A chill raced up his spine.

It was the guy who had been in his room. The guy with the club instead of a right hand.

Chip realized the butcher knife was shaking in his hand. His whole body was trembling.

The hooded figure was now standing stuffing things into the boiler fire with his left hand. Chip heard him sobbing softly. He was crying.

Chip glanced back at Al, whose expression was a mixture of dread and curiosity.

They walked slowly to the open office door.

Chip felt something rub against his leg and uttered a startled cry. He glanced down and saw Maggie scurry away. When he looked back up the hooded figure was spinning around to face him.

Chip and Al gasped in horror.

Although Chip had seen the hooded figure's face before in the dim light of his room, it was even more hideous in the glow of the crackling fire. The ugly gash that ran diagonally across his face was scabby, with bits of it peeling off, revealing pink flesh underneath. Part of his lip hung limply from his mouth, and the eye that hung down was moving around as if it had a life of its own.

The thing on his hand wasn't a club at all, Chip could now see, but a plaster cast.

The deformed face was wet with tears.

Chip's mouth dropped open as he fought back the revulsion he felt at the sight of the ghastly face. The whole scene was so bizarre, so grotesque.

"What are you up to, buddy?" Al asked.

The simple question in the outlandish setting sounded absurd to Chip.

The hideous face stared back at them, speechless.

Al flicked the office light on, and the face squinted.

Then Chip realized who it was.

Even though the face was horribly deformed, he could still recognize the boy.

He remembered what he had looked like when he had played against him last year in the Middleton-Springwood football game.

It was Scott Martin!

Chapter 20

"So, what's the story, ace? Let's hear it," Al said, gesturing with the dumbbell. "Before I mess up what's left of your…"

"Chill out, Al!" Chip exclaimed. "That's Scott Martin, Springwood's ex-quarterback. You remember. He played against us last year. And killed us."

"Jesus…" Al lowered the dumbbell, his mouth agape. He stared dumbfounded at Scott. "What happened to your face, dude?"

"I was… in a car accident," Scott said in a soft, lisping voice, tugging the hood tighter around his face, turning his head, keeping it in the shadows.

"A car accident did *that* to your face?" Al asked in disbelief.

"Hey, cool it, Al. Huh?" Chip reproached his brother. "Have some…" *Pity.* He turned his attention to Scott. "What happened, Scott?"

"The accident was only part of it," Scott said in a bitter voice. "And Evan Walker was the other part."

"Evan Walker? You mean the kid who used to live here?" Chip asked, setting the butcher knife down on Dr. Hawke's desk. He studied Scott's haggard, dreadful face.

"Evan Walker did this to my face with a tire iron. Just before he smashed the bones in my passing hand. Crushed them. I'll never play football again.

"See these?" Scott held what appeared to be several letters in his hand. "That's over, too. My girlfriend, Alicia. Beautiful girl. Never again. She could never deal with this face."

Alicia? Chip remembered the letter jacket she had worn — probably Scott's.

Scott's eyes glinted madly. Then he spun around in the examination chair and tossed the letters into the fire. Flames shot from the boiler, nearly licking his fingers. "There's something evil in this house," he rasped.

"What?" Chip asked.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Scott said. His speech sounded odd through his ragged, misshapen lips. "I'm not sure I believe it myself."

"Try us," Al said impatiently.

Scott took a deep breath. "I was here the night of the murders. Sitting in a parked car outside the house. I saw Alicia go inside with Evan. She was still blind, then…"

"Blind?" Al interrupted. "Alicia was blind?"

"She was blinded in the same car accident I was in," Scott said. He half turned in the chair. His profile was terribly abnormal.

"Evan Walker's uncle was a retired eye doctor, and Alicia thought he could cure her blindness." Scott's expression darkened. "And I guess he must have — since she's no longer blind. The only thing is, it *wasn't* Dr. Hawke that helped her. It was…"

A tongue of fire jumped out of the furnace.

"…an evil spirit," Scott finished.

"You wanna tell us about this evil spirit?" Al asked, obviously not buying into what Scott was telling them.

But Chip was ready to believe anything. Maybe evil spirits would explain his nightmares. He leaned on the desk and his hand accidentally brushed against the handle of the butcher knife. The blade swung around to point at Scott.

"I've spent a lot of time thinking about this," Scott rasped. "A *lot* of time. Trying to piece together the puzzle. That's why I came here tonight. The answer's here. And I have to know."

"That's what Alicia said last night," Chip said. "She was looking for an answer."

Scott's one good eye seemed to flash at the mention of Alicia's name.

"Dr. Hawke had died weeks before the murders," Scott continued. "His heart stopped beating for several minutes, but he was revived. And *then* all the weird things started to happen."

"What weird things?" Al asked.

"A hit-and-run driver killed Alicia's neighbor, Tiffany Clark, and ran over my friend Boomer's legs. Ellen Sawyer was murdered, and then there was the accident… that happened to me and Alicia." Scott paused for a moment, gathering his strength to continue. "After I got Alicia out of here and they discovered the bodies in the furnace, the police found Dr. Hawke dead in his bed, like he had died in his sleep or something, but I think he had been dead all along." Scott's voice was so low Chip and Al had to lean closer to hear him. "I think Dr. Hawke died that night when his heart

stopped. That's when the evil spirit took over his body," Scott said in a harsh whisper.

Chip felt a wave of fear sweep through his body.

"And now it's moved on," Scott continued in his pain-filled voice. "Moved into a living body. At least… I think she's still alive."

Chapter 21

"Whoa!" Chip exclaimed, holding his hands up in protest. "You don't mean… Alicia?" Chip swallowed hard. "Do you?"

Scott turned to face Chip and nodded grimly.

Chip shook his head with disbelief. Not Alicia. Not the girl he had kissed.

"How did you come up with this… *theory?"* Chip asked.

"I was parked outside this house that night when I heard her scream. I ran in and heard another scream. Coming from the basement. I ran down here and found Alicia strapped to this chair. The walls… there was blood all over…" Scott's voice trailed off.

Chip looked at Al, who was staring at Scott as if spellbound.

Alicia was *here* the night of the murders. Why hadn't she said anything about that? Was it too horrible to mention? Or maybe she had been in shock and didn't remember.

Chip ran his eyes along the cold basement wall that had been part of Dr. Hawke's office. Strange shadows were being tossed about by the burning boiler fire. As Chip watched the shadows dance over the scarlet splatters, the blood turned liquid again and started to run down the walls, first in trickles, then more and more until it was like a crimson waterfall cascading down the wall and across the floor. It was coming toward him. Coming with such force it would surely knock him down and he would drown…

Chip gasped and closed his eyes, but nothing happened. It was quiet suddenly, the only sound the fire crackling inside the old furnace.

Chip slowly opened his eyes again. There was no waterfall of blood. The room was as it had been before. Al and Scott were still talking about the murders as if nothing had just happened — as if they had not seen or heard the torrent of blood.

Scott was staring into the fire. "When I charged in, Alicia was screaming. The door to the furnace was wide open. I could see Tiffany and Ellen, the two murdered girls, inside. They had been stuffed in so savagely, their arms and legs were broken and tangled up. I saw their faces. *They had no eyes.* Just empty sockets. Then, as I watched, their flesh melted away."

Scott's gaze turned upward. "Evan had hanged himself from those pipes. Or *someone* had hanged him. His eye sockets were also empty." Scott looked back at the fire. His mouth was a bitter gash. "Alicia was strapped in the chair. In the middle of a nightmare. Talking to someone. Only she wasn't blind anymore."

"So how did she get her eyesight back?" Al asked with a puzzled frown.

Scott drew in a deep, ragged breath. "Don't you get it? She was making a deal with the evil spirit to get her eyesight back!"

"What deal?" Chip asked.

"She let the evil spirit enter her!" Scott exclaimed. "It lives in her now!"

Chapter 22

The fire whooshed inside the furnace as a cold draft slipped in through the shattered basement window.

"No offense, Scott." Chip still felt a bit dazed. "You've obviously been through a lot and all, but I think what you just told me is a lot of crap."

Suddenly the boiler fire spat out a burning piece of paper. It floated lazily in the air for a moment before landing at Chip's sneakers. Chip looked down at it. He saw the words:

I'll always love you, Scotty,

Alicia

Chip watched, hypnotized, until the charred piece of letter burned away to nothing.

He was surprised by the strong pang of jealousy he felt.

And the powerful feeling of fear.

"She's evil…" Chip heard Scott say in a voice that seemed a thousand miles away.

"Look, Scott," Chip began, "maybe you'd better go home and get some rest." *And stop breaking into my house*, he added silently.

But Scott seemed to be listening to a different voice. A voice Chip could not hear.

Scott was staring into the fire.

"Look, dude," Al said, moving closer to Scott. "The party's over. It's time to…"

A loud crash interrupted Al's words.

"The evil spirit's here…" Scott said, his warped face growing pale.

Chapter 23

Chip suspected a more mundane explanation for the crash. "What's over there, Al?" Chip asked, nodding in the direction the sound had come from.

"Ah… I think it's a utility closet or something. Probably some mice or squirrels in there," Al said.

"Maybe we should check it out," Chip suggested.

"Don't go back there!" Scott warned, his lispy voice growing shrill. "That's where the evil spirit lives."

Ignoring Scott, Chip walked out of the office and to the door next to it. He heard a scampering in the darkness.

Maggie ran up to him. She rubbed her body against his leg.

"Maybe you should send her in first," Al cracked from the office doorway.

Chip grinned. He slowly reached out his hand and twisted the doorknob. The door opened onto a dark room. He hesitated for a moment. Nothing happened.

Chip groped along the wall until he found the light switch and flicked it on. It was a cramped little room full of cleaning supplies, rusty gardening tools, and some paint cans that looked at least a hundred years old. Some musty-smelling newspapers were stacked against one wall next to a pile of old magazines.

Maggie darted into the room. She made her way to one corner and started chewing something off a McDonald's wrapper that was on the floor — a little hunk of hardened cheese.

Chip heard a sound behind him. He shot a glance over his shoulder. Al had just stepped into the room.

"Been eating in here, Al?" Chip asked as Maggie greedily finished off the cheese.

"Ah… I might have," Al said cryptically.

Something caught Chip's eye. "Knock the light out for a second, Al."

"What for?"

"Just do it."

The light went out and the room was dark. Chip detected a tiny pinprick of light in the wall that separated the office from the utility closet. He put his eye to it. It was a peephole.

"Turn the light back on," Chip instructed Al. The light came back on. "Look there. You can see right into the office."

Maggie had finished with the McDonald's wrapper and was now sniffing at the wall. Chip's eyes focused on the cat. Then he ran his hands along the wall where she was sniffing. He felt a cool draft.

Chip glanced over his shoulder at his brother. "I think this part of the wall is fake." He tapped the wall with his knuckles. A hollow sound echoed back.

Chip looked curiously at Al. "What do you think is back there?"

Al shrugged.

Chip started pushing on the wall, pushing on it where he could feel the draft coming through the barely perceptible cracks.

A spider drifted down, swaying on the end of a strand, and landed on Chip's hand. Chip blew it away with a puff of air as he continued to push with all his might.

The door suddenly swung open and Chip fell against it. He lost his balance and stumbled forward into darkness.

Chapter 24

A cold chill burst into the room.

Maggie sprung backward as if she had been attacked. She darted back toward Dr. Hawke's office.

"It's some kind of tunnel or shaft," Chip said, standing up and brushing himself off. Chip shivered from the cold, and from the fear of what might be up ahead. "Where do you suppose it goes?" he asked Al.

"Probably outside somewhere. How should I know?"

"Someone's been here recently."

"What do you mean?"

"The food wrappers and stuff. Someone's been hiding in our basement, in this closet, going in and out this way," Chip said, motioning up the dark tunnel. It was as black as pitch.

They could see only a few feet ahead. Chip took a step forward and his foot hit something soft. A repulsive screech made him leap back.

Then something shot out of the darkness. Something gray and furry and greasy looking. A very large rat.

Chip yelped in surprise as he jumped in the air to dodge the slimy creature. Al gasped as the rat ran across his feet on its way out the door.

Chip looked back into the dark tunnel, then quickly closed the door. "I'll board the door up the first chance I get."

"So where's that stupid cat of yours when we need her?" Al asked.

"I'd say she's smarter than us," Chip said, glancing about for Maggie, but the cat had vanished. "Since she's gone and we're here getting scared to death by rats."

Chip was silent for a moment, listening for the cluttering of the rat. "Hey, Scott!" Chip called. "Is that rat still out there?"

There was no reply from the other room.

"He probably ate it," Al cracked.

Chip chuckled in spite of himself. "Hey, Scott!" he called again. "You still there?"

Still no answer.

"He probably went through the basement window along with that rat," Al said. "Did you see where he broke our window?"

"Yeah, I saw it," Chip said. "Yo — Scott!"

It was as quiet as a coffin.

"Scott — you out there?" Chip called again.

"Why?" Al asked plainly. "Why's he doing all this?"

"The same reason he's been spying on our house. The same reason he broke into the basement and came into my bedroom. The same reason he was stuffing Alicia's love letters into our furnace…" Chip stopped abruptly when he heard soft footsteps outside the utility closet door.

Maggie stuck her head in the door and looked curiously about.

Chip and Al breathed a sigh of relief.

"You were saying?" Al asked.

"Huh?"

"About all the reasons Scott did those things."

"Because he's nuts," Chip said simply.

Al chortled. "Or maybe this house makes people nuts."

"Yeah, maybe," Chip agreed. "I guess I'd be nuts too if I saw the things he saw down here the night he rescued Alicia. And by the way, who the hell are you talking to down here at night? It's bad enough you're down here clanking weights. Now your voice is coming up the vent as well."

"You're crazy," Al replied. "You're hearing things."

"Scott!" Chip shouted for the last time.

Chip walked out of the utility closet, scanning the dark corners and hidden shadows of the basement, looking for the rat.

But there was no rat. And there was no Scott, either. Both were long gone.

The only sign of life was the fire crackling in the furnace.

Chapter 25

Monday afternoon at Springwood High, Chip was spinning his locker combination dial for the second time. Or was it the third? He couldn't remember. A new locker, new school, new classes, new teachers, new everything.

Chip wore a light blue sweater over straight-legged black denim jeans. For some reason the weather always seemed warmer away from Elm Street. It was so warm, in fact, he was tempted to take off his sweater and just wear his T-shirt.

But the T-shirt he had put on that morning when he was still groggy with sleep was his old Middleton High T-shirt, and he didn't want to appear to be an outsider at Springwood High. Especially not on his first day of school.

He yanked down on his locker handle. It still wouldn't open. He tried spinning the dial again.

Chip had spent most of Sunday afternoon cleaning the house and trying not to think of Alicia. He had gone to her house again on Sunday but was met with the same cold reception as before by Alicia's sullen-faced mother, who told him she wasn't home.

And yet, when he left, he had glanced over his shoulder and thought he had seen someone looking out an upstairs bedroom window at him. Had Alicia told her mother to get rid of him if he came around?

Chip yanked down hard on the locker door again, and again nothing happened. Out of frustration he punched the door with a resounding clang that caused several students to eye him nervously as they walked by.

Someone tapped him roughly on the shoulder. Chip spun around. The boy standing behind him was a huge guy with a gap in his front teeth. "You'd better have a good reason for trying to break into my locker, dude," the big guy said sharply.

Chip glanced at the locker number, then turned red with embarrassment. "Sorry," he mumbled, sliding over a locker. "I guess I'm over here." He spun the dial of his locker as the big guy continued to stare at him. Fortunately, Chip was able to open his locker on the first try. Satisfied, the big guy opened his own locker.

"You're Chip Parker, aren't you?" he asked, glancing sideways at Chip.

"Yeah," Chip said, a little surprised that the guy knew who he was.

"My name's Charlie Chadwick. I played against you last year. I'm the guy who pushed your head down in the mud during a big pileup," Charlie said bluntly. "Remember me? You had to leave the game for a play to clear the muck out of your mouth. You almost suffocated,"

"Oh, yeah. That was you?" Chip asked, not sure how to react to Charlie's confession.

"Are you going to try out for the team?" Charlie asked, yanking out a textbook and shoving another one in.

"Yeah. This afternoon at practice," Chip said. "Me and my brother."

"Al Parker?"

"Yeah."

"I played against Al Parker two years ago," Charlie said. "On defense he broke two of our halfback's ribs."

"Uh-huh," Chip said. He didn't know what else to say. He hoped Charlie wouldn't punish him for what his brother had done.

"Your brother can play some serious defense," Charlie said with admiration.

Chip breathed a sigh of relief. So Charlie admired dirty tricks. He'd have to remember that.

Charlie slammed his locker door shut. "I just wanted you to know that Scott Martin was the greatest quarterback this school has ever had. And no one will ever replace him. If you think you can just walk on the field and be our quarterback, you'd better think again. Even if Roger Dawson does suck and Barney Peters throws like a girl." Charlie walked away without another word.

"Don't take him too seriously," came a voice from behind Chip.

A kid in a wheelchair was at the locker on the other side of the hall. He twirled the dial on his combination lock with a practiced motion and easily flicked the door open, then turned his attention to Chip. "Charlie Chadwick thinks all quarterbacks should wear skirts."

Chip smiled weakly.

"My name's Boomer," the kid said, holding out his hand.

Chip shook it. "Chip Parker. How'd you know I played quarterback?"

"I played against you last year," Boomer said. "I played fullback."

"Oh," Chip said, his eyes glancing down to the empty space beneath Boomer's knees where the rest of his legs should have been.

"See you at the tryout," Boomer said. He pulled a book from his locker and placed it in his lap, closed his locker door, spun around nimbly on the back wheels of his wheelchair, and made his way expertly through the crowded hallway. He never looked back.

Chip remembered Boomer from last year's game, remembered that the guy had had legs like tree trunks. Then he recalled that Scott had mentioned his friend Boomer. So Boomer was connected to this whole thing, too.

Chip found his biology textbook, closed his locker, and made his way down the hall.

He wondered how Al was making out. They had shared an English class earlier that morning, which Al had slept through, but Chip hadn't seen his brother since.

Chip had sat next to Barney Peters during third-period math class. Barney was the second string senior quarterback for the Springwood Owls, a tall, gangly boy with a smattering of pimples and the biggest feet Chip had ever seen. Barney was built more along the lines of a basketball team center than a quarterback of a football team.

Chip had been friendly to Barney, but Barney had been kind of cool back. Probably because he knew they would be competing against each other for the quarterback spot.

Or maybe it was because he knew Chip lived on Elm Street.

It seemed a lot of kids at school already knew who he was, or at least they knew he was the guy who had moved into Evan Walker's old house. He had already received more than his share of curious, sometimes fearful, looks.

Just one more class to go before the tryout, Chip consoled himself as he joined the flow of students in the hallway. He wished his throwing arm didn't feel like lead. He had slept on it in a funny position last night. He glanced at the room numbers, looking for the biology lab. He was on the wrong floor. He had to go down a flight.

Chip joined the mob in the stairwell. He saw Al walking down the stairs ahead of him. "Al!" Chip called. But the boy didn't turn around. The kid looked like Al from the back, tall and broad-shouldered like Al, and wearing the same sweatshirt. He called again, but his voice was lost in the noise of the stairwell.

Then Chip saw Barney Peters a few yards ahead of the hooded guy. Tall and skinny, Barney was easy to spot. He was goofing around with a couple of guys in letter jackets as the throng moved down the staircase.

The hooded guy seemed to be forcing his muscular frame through the crowd, slowly making his way toward Barney.

Chip felt a sudden stab of dread.

"Al! Wait up!" Chip bellowed at the top of his lungs. The boy in the hooded sweatshirt didn't turn, though he must have heard Chip's yell.

Chip shouted again.

A fat kid on the stairs in front of him turned around and shot Chip a nasty look. "My ears, dude," he said, sticking a pudgy finger in one ear.

"Sorry," Chip mumbled, pushing past that kid, then some others. Chip ignored the curses tossed in his direction as he barreled through the crowd.

He knew in his gut that if he didn't get to Barney before the kid in the hooded sweatshirt, something bad was going to happen.

Something very bad.

He had to get to Barney, had to warn Barney, had to warn Barney before the guy in the hood caught up to him.

"Barney!" Chip called.

But Barney didn't hear him, either.

Chip kept pushing his way through the crowd — the entire student body of Springwood High seemed to be between him and his goal. He was almost there, maybe ten feet away, when he momentarily lost sight of both Barney and the hooded guy.

"Barney!" Chip shouted.

Barney spun around. He was just a few feet away.

And then Barney was falling.

Barney reached a hand out and Chip tried to grasp it, but he was too late. Barney hit the hard concrete stairs on his side, bounced hard, and hit the stairs again. His face slammed into the edge of a step with a sickening *smack.*

Barney started rolling down the stairs, a spray of blood from his busted nose showering those around him. A shrill scream shot up from the onlookers who tried to get out of his way. He finally came to rest in a tangled mess at the bottom of the stairs, his arms and legs twisted beneath his body, his jaw snapped open at a grotesque angle, his face a bloody pulp.

A girl at the bottom of the staircase screamed. Then another.

"Omigod, he's dead!"

Chapter 26

Chip turned away, sickened by the sight. For a moment he thought he might hurl. His arms went limp, and his biology book slipped out of his hands. It bumped down the stairs and struck Barney in the face.

Barney moaned.

He wasn't dead.

Chip gripped the stair railing tightly and fought the wave of nausea sweeping over him. When he had caught his breath, he turned his head and looked down the stairs.

But the sight of Barney sprawled out on the hard concrete, blood gushing from his mouth, several of his teeth out, lying on the front of his shirt, an ugly gash above his eye where he had hit the edge of the stairs, brought on another wave of nausea.

Another sickening thought gripped Chip. Barney looked just like Scott must have looked after his car accident.

Everyone stood frozen as if in a bad dream. One of the girls had fainted, and her friend was gently holding her head. Then the pack stirred to life and someone ran for help.

Barney groaned in pain and tried to push himself up into a sitting position. Chip was at his side, helping him.

"Who pushed me?" Barney's glazed eyes slowly began to focus on Chip. "Why'd you push me?" Barney asked through bloody lips.

"Huh?" Chip couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"You called my name… I turned around… you pushed me…" Barney's voice trailed off. More blood streamed from his mouth, onto Chip's light blue sweater.

A murmur went through the mob.

"What happened?" a kid asked as he arrived on the scene.

"That new kid pushed Barney Peters down the stairs," someone answered.

Chip's face turned pale as he looked about him, looked at the crowd staring back at him. Staring at him with accusing eyes. Hate-filled eyes. He wanted to say something, to defend himself, to shout out his innocence. But his tongue was tied in a big, useless knot.

He looked down at Barney, whose eyes were glazing over again. "Barney — that's not what happened," Chip said softly, gently shaking the boy. "Tell them. Tell…"

Barney passed out.

Chip looked back up at the accusing stares of the crowd.

"The new guy pushed Barney down the stairs!" someone shouted louder.

"Who?"

"Chip Parker," Charlie Chadwick said, stepping out of the crowd, looming above Chip, his hands balled into fists at his side.

The mob began to form around him.

"No! I…I didn't do it," Chip stammered. "It was an accident."

The eyes that looked back at him didn't believe him.

"Did someone call 911?" Chip shouted, fighting back the panic he felt rising in him.

No one answered.

The crowd clustered around him.

"Someone call 911! He needs an ambulance," Chip repeated more urgently, his voice growing shrill. "And get a teacher!"

"What's going on?" asked a girl.

"It's the kid who moved into Evan Walker's old house," came another voice from the crowd. "His name's Chip Parker."

"Who?" someone else asked.

"The kid living in the haunted house. He pushed Barney Peters down the stairs."

"I didn't push him!" Chip exclaimed, trying to quell the panic rising in his voice. "He fell. It was an accident. I swear, the guy just fell."

"Barney saw you do it, dude," Charlie said menacingly. "I heard him say so."

"I saw him do it, too," came a voice out of the crowd.

Chip angrily shot his head in the direction of the voice to spot the liar. He caught a brief glance of someone wearing a hood.

The bell rang shrilly, echoing up and down the staircase.

But still nobody moved.

Then the crowd suddenly parted as a teacher appeared. "What happened?" asked the big, barrel-chested man. He was wearing a tight brown suit.

"He fell," Chip told the teacher.

"He was pushed," someone countered.

"Did anyone call 911?" the teacher asked.

"I think someone did already, Mr. Kuzak," came a voice from the back.

"All right, everyone," Mr. Kuzak barked. "Get to your classes. Now! Show time is over."

The crowd broke up slowly, muttering, grumbling.

In the distance, Chip heard the wail of a siren.

*** * ***

After his last class, Chip walked over to the football field with mixed feelings. Tryouts didn't seem so important to him anymore. Barney had been hurt, and everyone thought he was responsible.

His first day of school, and already everyone thought he had viciously pushed a kid down the stairs. Even worse, when the students found out where he lived — in Weird Evan Walker's house on Elm Street — they just shrugged as if to say, "Well, what can you expect from someone who would live there?"

Chip felt everyone's eyes on him in the hallway after school. Everywhere he looked, someone had an accusing glance or a curious stare. The after-school crowd had parted as if he was radioactive or something and they didn't want to be contaminated.

And it wasn't any different as he jogged across the field. Most of the Springwood Owls were spread out on the field doing muscle-stretching exercises and chatting, but the jabbering came to an abrupt halt when they spotted him. Chip felt their eyes on him as he loped across the field with his equipment bag slung over his shoulder.

Chip spotted Boomer in his wheelchair near the sideline. He had a clipboard in one hand and was jotting something down, TEAM MANAGER was printed in big block letters on his gray sweatshirt.

Standing next to Boomer was an older man in a baseball cap with a large owl on the front. A gray and green sweatshirt stretched over his fat gut and a shiny whistle dangled from around his neck. Chip guessed the man must be Coach Cuttler.

Cuttler was yelling at someone wearing a hooded sweatshirt. Must be Al, Chip figured. Leave it to his brother to piss off the coach the first time they met. Chip caught snatches of the conversation as he approached them.

"Look, Parker, I told you before," Cuttler said. "We don't play a wishbone offense at Springwood. Our quarterbacks *pass,* they don't run."

"I'm only asking for a chance," Al protested.

"I've got you penciled in at free safety," Cuttler said in a firm voice.

"So you're not even going to give me a chance?" Al griped.

"Yeah, I'll give you a chance." Cuttler said. "When I'm out of quarterbacks."

Cuttler beamed when he saw Chip. "Now here's a kid who can play quarterback." Cuttler slapped Chip on the back. "That was a hell of a game you played against us last year. Too bad your defense couldn't hold the lead."

"Thank you, sir," Chip said gratefully. It was the first nice thing anyone had said to him all day. He just wished he hadn't said it in front of Al. Chip glanced at Al, who was looking back at him darkly.

A breeze gusted up and blew back the blanket that covered Boomer's legs. When they had first met at his locker, Chip thought Boomer had no legs. Now Chip saw that Boomer did have legs, but what was left of them resembled two shriveled french fries. It was as if they had been crushed flat and useless.

Coach Cuttler gestured to Boomer. "This is my team manager, Boomer Harrison."

Chip nodded. "We've met."

"Like I said, you played well against us last year," Coach Cuttler said. "I just hope you do as well in the tryout. We need some fresh meat on this team. Especially since Martin dropped out of school." The coach got a faraway look in his eyes. "Best damn quarterback I ever had…"

"Coach?" Al interrupted. "I just wanted to remind you that Middleton beat you guys two years ago when I played quarterback for them."

"I remember," Cuttler said frowning. "We had one of the worst teams I ever coached that year. That was the year before Martin became the starter."

"I just wanted to remind you that quarterback is my number-one position," Al said.

Cuttler let out an exasperated breath. "Thank you. I'll keep that in mind," he muttered, jotting something down on his clipboard.

"I'm just asking for a fair chance," Al whined.

"Look, Parker, I only have room on my roster for two quarterbacks," Cuttler said. "A starter and a backup. And I've got two of them. So if you don't beat out one of them…"

"Peters is hurt, Coach," Boomer said, erasing something on his clipboard.

"What?" Cuttler asked, his jaw dropping.

"Fell down some stairs or something," Boomer said, glancing at Chip. Was Boomer accusing him? Like everyone else?

A look of disgust creased Cuttler's face. He slammed his clipboard to the ground. "What next?" he muttered loudly. Cuttler said nothing for a few moments, just shook his head in dismay. Then he shot a glance at Chip and Al. "You two, get your pads on." He nodded in the direction of the stadium locker room entrance, which was right across the cinder track.

"You can use any empty locker for now," Boomer added.

"And hustle," Cuttler said, brushing some grass off his clipboard.

Chip picked up his gear, then he and Al jogged to the locker room. They found two empty lockers and quickly changed into cleats and pads.

"What happened to Peters?" Al asked.

"He fell down some stairs," Chip said, tight lipped. "But he thinks someone pushed him."

"No kidding," Al said. Chip thought he saw Al briefly smirk. "So, um, who pushed him? Did he say?"

"Yeah," Chip muttered, trying not to recall the bloody mess that had once been Barney Peters' face. "He thinks *I* did it."

Al laughed out loud.

Chip glared at him. "Why are you laughing?"

Al shrugged. "I don't know. I just think it's funny he would accuse you." Al laced up his cleats. "So, did you do it?"

Chip stared at his brother in disbelief. "What? Push Peters down the stairs?"

"Yeah," Al said calmly.

"Of course not. Why would I do that?"

"Maybe being near to Daddy's spirit is getting to you," Al said with a devilish grin.

Chip knew Al was playing mind games with him, trying to distract him from the tryout so he would win the quarterback position.

Al slipped a thick forearm pad on and wrapped tape around it to hold it in place. Then he slammed his forearm into the metal locker door with such force the whole row shook.

A big dent was left in the locker where Al had just smashed it. Chip had a flashback of his first dream the night he moved into the house on Elm Street, when someone in a hood had smashed him in the face just like that. He had thought it was Al… in the dream… But Al wouldn't hurt him like that. Even during their worst fights, Al held back. At least he always had in the past, before they moved into the house on Elm Street.

"That should do," Al said with a pleased expression, inspecting the dent in the locker door. His gaze shifted to Chip. His pale blue eyes seemed paler than ever. "Should do just fine," he said ominously, slipping on the other forearm pad and taping it into place.

Chapter 27

Al slipped his black mouthpiece in and grinned luridly at Chip. Al wore a black mouthpiece instead of a white one to intimidate his opponents. Al's pale blue eyes were glowing fervently now, which spelled trouble for someone.

Probably that freshman quarterback Roger the Dodger. *Roger had better live up to his name,* Chip thought. *Al would kill to play quarterback.*

Chip was still lacing up his cleats when Al left the locker room. He didn't wait for Chip. Not that Chip cared much one way or the other. Chip smoothed back his tousled brown hair as best he could, slipped on his helmet, and followed Al out to the playing field.

Cuttler was running the team through drills. Fortunately it was a warm afternoon, and Chip felt his arm loosen up as he started to toss the ball back and forth with Al. Chip looked up when he saw Boomer wheeling toward him.

"Cuttler wants to take a look at you," Boomer told Chip. "The receivers are going to run some simple slant patterns so he can check out your timing."

Chip nodded.

To Al, Boomer said, "Take the free safety position."

"What about the quarterback position?" Al asked, scowling.

"What about it?" Boomer asked. He had overheard Al arguing with Coach Cuttler.

"Am I going to get a shot at it or what?"

"Take it up with Cuttler, not me," Boomer said, wheeling away.

"Legless gimp," Chip heard Al mutter.

The whistle blew shrilly. "Let's go, Parkers," Coach Cuttler shouted over to them, waving them in.

Al snapped his chin strap on as the brothers jogged out onto the field. "Keep your head up out there," Al snarled at Chip, "if you want to keep it at all."

"Keep it clean, bro'," Chip warned as Al joined the defensive huddle. *Like it's my fault the coach won't let him play quarterback,* Chip thought.

Chip joined the offensive huddle. His heart was racing, but he knew once he started to play, all the distractions would just fade away. That was the way it always was when he played football.

"Hey, man. We know why you messed Barney up!" one of the guys in the huddle suddenly snarled at Chip as he was calling the play in the huddle.

"Tell him, Sam," someone else said.

Uh-oh, Chip thought to himself. This wasn't a good start.

"What happened to Barney was an accident," Chip said sharply. He looked each player in the eyes, a challenging look. "I've got a job to do now. So why don't you just do yours? If anyone has a problem with what happened to Barney, meet me after practice. We'll settle it then."

Chip clapped his hands and broke the huddle before the players could respond. The entire team would probably kick his butt after practice. But what else could he do? His job as quarterback was to run the team, and he wouldn't be able to do that if he didn't establish his leadership.

On the line of scrimmage, Chip checked out the defense. He made brief eye contact with his receiver, barked out the call, and the ball was hiked.

Suddenly twenty-two football players sprang into action. Chip took three quick steps back, patted the ball with his free hand to tighten his grip, and picked up his man as he made his cut near the sideline.

His receiver was too close to the sideline, Chip realized. He shouldn't be over that far. He was throwing the timing completely off. A second later it became irrelevant as Al came over to double up on the receiver, colliding with him, sending the receiver out of bounds and making him ineligible.

Al must have overheard Boomer telling him to run a slant pattern and anticipated it, effectively screwing up the entire play.

But his receiver shouldn't have been that close to the sideline, anyway, Chip thought angrily. He automatically looked for his secondary receiver. He had to scramble as his pocket collapsed on him. His offensive lineman appeared to be making only a halfhearted effort to keep out the rampaging defensive players.

Chip quickly scanned the field, but all of his remaining receivers were covered, and they didn't seem to be trying very hard to get open.

As Chip debated what to do in the split second, a body came flying over the top of his protection, momentarily blotting out the sun. Chip

caught a glimpse of the forearm that smashed him in the face, propelling him violently to the hard turf, smashing his head into the ground. Tiny stars danced around inside his brain. Then the stars faded and Chip tried to open his eyes. It took a lot of effort and he found himself staring up at a round golden sun in a clear blue sky.

He tried to struggle to his feet, but wooziness forced him back down. Groggy and disoriented, Chip felt as if his brain had become dislodged inside his head.

Then he looked up as a black form blotted out the sun again.

It was the hooded figure from his dream.

Chip blinked his eyes, trying to blink away the menacing figure. When his eyes refocused he saw Al, standing over him, unsnapping his chin strap, a big smirk on his face.

Then everything went black.

*** * ***

Chip smelled curry powder. The sharp aroma filled his nostrils. He opened his eyes and sat up with a painful groan. His body pushed into the soft cushions of the living room couch. He was home, though he couldn't remember how he had gotten there. His head was pounding, his vision was still blurry, and his cheek felt as if it had swollen up.

He vaguely remembered getting hurt on the football field. He hoped his cheekbone wasn't broken. He wondered if he had been taken to the hospital. He was having trouble thinking straight, remembering what had happened. The room swam briefly before his eyes. He saw a hazy figure standing in the kitchen archway.

Wearing a hood.

Holding a knife.

Chip gasped.

The hooded figure was rapidly crossing the room now, coming for him. It had on a cape.

A cape?

Chip couldn't make sense of what was happening. He struggled to his feet, but as he rose from the couch dizziness sent him crashing back down again. The deep cushions seemed to swallow him up. *If I don't move, I'll*

die, Chip thought as a rush of adrenaline gave him new strength. Panic-stricken, he flailed his hands as he attempted to rise again.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?"

At the sound of his mother's voice, Chip stopped flailing. His vision cleared and he saw his mother. She was wearing a loose flowery dress. She held a long wooden spoon in one hand, which Chip had thought was a knife.

Chip laughed with relief.

His cheerful, pretty, eternally optimistic mother smiled brightly at him. "What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing," Chip said, trying to smile. But his smile quickly turned into a taut expression of pain and anguish as his head began to throb.

"What happened?" his mother asked. Her bright expression was replaced with one of worry and she sat down next to him on the couch. "There's a big welt on your cheek."

Through the whirring in his head Chip heard someone grunt in the basement.

Al. Pumping iron.

Then he remembered.

Al had put his lights out.

Chip struggled to sit up. "I think Al hit me…" Chip started to say before the room tilted at an odd angle and he had to lie back down again.

When his head cleared he saw his mother at the top of the basement stairs. "Al — get up here!" she shouted down the stairs in a stern voice.

"No, Mom…" Chip heard one last, loud grunt and then the clunk of heavy metal striking the basement floor. Then he saw his mother step back as a sweating, hooded Al trudged up the last few steps.

Al stood before their mother, easily dwarfing her, and stared down at her with a blank, almost laconic expression on his face.

"How many times have I told you not to fight with your brother!" his mother immediately began to shout.

"Fight?" Al asked, glancing malevolently at Chip.

"It wasn't like that, Mom!" Chip yelled from the couch. More throbbing, more pain in his head. "It was in a game."

His mother glanced over at him. "A football game?"

"Yeah."

"He got his bell rung in the tryout and Coach Cuttler told me to take him home," Al told his mother in a surly voice. "We weren't *fighting."*

Al leaned against the kitchen wall and wiped sweat from his face with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. He looked over at Chip. "We've got another tryout tomorrow if you think you can handle it — wimp." He shook his head in disgust. "One play and you get yourself knocked out. And I've got to take you home. Nice going, jerk. You played like a pansy out there. Maybe you should give up football and help your mother make doughnuts…"

"You *knocked* your brother out?" Mrs. Parker asked incredulously.

"Who says *I* did it?" Al asked, his face growing dark with anger.

Mrs. Parker glanced at Chip. "Did he do it?"

Chip was hesitant. "I thought you did it," he said to Al. "Did you?"

Mrs. Parker broke in before Al could answer. "How many times have you brought him home looking like this?" she asked, glaring at Al. "Banged up and bruised, cut and bleeding. How many times?" His mother's voice had become shrill, rising with her anger.

Al didn't reply. He just looked past his mother with a thousand-mile stare.

"How many times have you brought your brother back looking like this? I'm asking you a question, young man. I want an answer," she persisted.

"Am I supposed to keep count or something?" Al asked flippantly. "It's not my fault he's a wimp. And he's *not* my brother."

Al brushed past his mother and went into the kitchen, opened the fridge, and took out a jug of orange juice. He uncapped the jug and took a big swig. Some of the juice slopped down his chin. Al didn't bother to wipe it away.

"And how many times have I told you *not* to do that?" his mother yelled at Al.

"Do what?" Al asked in an exasperated tone, taking another big drink, gulping noisily.

"Drink from the jug. Leaving your germs everywhere. What if someone else wants some orange juice?"

"Then I guess Chippy-pooh will just have to get my germs," Al said. He took another big gulp, his eyes fixed on his mother in a bored expression.

Mrs. Parker glowered at Al, but Al just gulped down more juice.

"You know something, Al," Mrs. Parker said. "I'm fed up with your attitude."

"Mom…" Chip gave his mother an imploring look. He hated it when his mother and Al fought, which they did more than ever since his dad had died. "C'mon — forget it. It's no big deal. It's football."

"If your father were here…" Mrs. Parker began to say.

"If he were here he wouldn't do nothing. He was a broken-down loser," Al said.

Mrs. Parker's eyes were wide with fury, but she was speechless.

"And he wasn't my father," Al went on. "Any more than Chip's my brother. He probably wasn't even Chip's father, from what I hear."

Mrs. Parker's mouth gaped open. "What?"

Al took another swig of juice and belched loudly. "I've been hearing plenty of stories about who you had an affair with when you lived in Springwood. When you were a teenager, just before you got married. I know who Chip's *real* dad is." Al's eyes had an odd gleam to them.

"What are you talking about?" Mrs. Parker asked in exasperation. "What *affair?"*

"An affair with *you-know-who,"* Al said, his eyes growing wide. "I know who Chip's *real* father is."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Mrs. Parker said, shaking her head at Al. "Let me smell your breath."

"What?" Al asked.

"Have you been drinking beer?"

"No."

"Where did you come up with this outlandish story?"

"I heard some stuff from a guy who's lived here all his life," Al said. "Some stuff he says his parents told him. He says you were doing it with…"

"Hey, Al! Cool it! Okay?" Chip warned his brother. "That's a lot of bull and you know it. It's okay to kid around with me about it, but it isn't funny with Mom."

"My friend says he knew who *my* real dad was, too," Al went on, ignoring his brother. "He says he was a fireman or something, died in a fire. It's just too bad he's dead now, because I was dying to meet him."

Mrs. Parker fixed Al with a steady gaze. Al didn't look her in the eyes. He just drank more juice from the jug and stared out the kitchen window,

stared at a big, flying bug that kept bashing itself against the glass.

"You know, you need my permission to play football," Mrs. Parker finally said, pointing a sharp fingernail in Al's face.

For a brief moment Chip was afraid Al might snap his mother's fingertip off.

"I can always talk to the principal and have you taken off the team," she continued. "So you just keep running off that smart mouth of yours and see if I don't!" She jabbed her finger in Al's chest for emphasis.

Al didn't flinch, though the fingernail must have hurt. If anything, he seemed to enjoy the pain.

"If you don't want to obey the rules of the house — which are *my* rules — then you can just leave, just get out. Get out!"

Al snorted. "Big loss that would be. A dump like this."

"Can we all just lighten up a bit?" Chip pleaded. He rose from the couch but had to steady himself on an armrest as a wave of dizziness swept over him.

His mother ignored him. "Go find a job and a place of your own to live!" She was screaming now, her voice several octaves higher than Chip had ever heard it before.

Chip shrugged helplessly. He had had enough. He pulled himself from the couch and headed for the front door as his mother and Al continued arguing, batting angry words back and forth like Ping-Pong balls.

Chip stepped out of the house and gently closed the door behind him. He sat on the front steps and stared out into the starry night. He hoped that after a few more days this old house would seem more like home to him.

A light blue Honda Civic cruised by. Scott looked out the driver's window at Chip. Then he roared away up the street.

A cool breeze tossed dead leaves about the front yard. Chip looked up and down Elm Street. At night there were no signs of life. Not even a stray cat. It seemed like all the neighbors kept their curtains drawn, their windows down, their doors locked.

He rose to his feet and out of curiosity made his way around to the backyard. He hadn't been back there since they'd moved in. As he passed the kitchen window he could still hear his mother and Al going at it, louder than ever, World War III in full swing.

Chip stood at the edge of the backyard. It was totally overgrown, macabre, even, in the square yellow light cast from the big, back kitchen

window. At the far end of the backyard there was a white picket fence, and dark woods beyond that. The rest of the yard was bordered by scraggly hedges that poked wildly in all directions. The grass hadn't been mowed in months, and tall weeds grew everywhere. In one corner of the yard, just beyond the reach of the kitchen light, Chip saw what looked like a small clearing. A garden, maybe.

He decided to check it out.

Dead leaves crackled beneath Chip's sneakers as he walked over to the clearing. This corner of the yard was neat and trim, the grass as smooth as a golf course putting green. There were many patches of dirt laid out in a neat and orderly fashion. Chip wondered what they were.

In a way it reminded him of a miniature graveyard.

Then something caught Chip's eyes. It looked like a tiny arm, poking out from beneath a fresh patch of dirt.

Afraid of what he might find, but too curious to ignore it, Chip picked a small, dead tree limb off the ground and poked the clump of dirt away.

Chip shivered at the sight of the thing. Some kind of weird doll. But with its *internal organs* showing. Bizarre, Chip thought. And totally repulsive. It even had hair.

Chip kicked some dirt back over the thing. He didn't want to look at it. Something about the doll reminded him of someone, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He kicked more dirt over the doll, covering the bits of fuzzy auburn hair on its head. Then more and more dirt, caught up in a frenzy, his foot powered by some out-of-control force.

Something snagged Chip's foot and he felt his knee snap. He tried to tug his foot free, but it only became more entangled in the vinelike thing that was trying to wrap itself around his entire leg. Panicked, he struggled frantically as the vine wrapped around his waist. He lost his balance and fell to the ground.

A shadow fell over him. Chip looked up and saw a hooded figure by a hole in the hedge at the end of the yard. Something glinted in the dim light — a switchblade?

"Help!" Chip yelled, hoping Al or his mother would hear him over their arguing. "Help!" he yelled again as the hooded figure loped across the yard headed straight toward him.

Chapter 28

"Are you all right?" said a raspy voice. "Lemme give you a hand."

Chip held out his hand and a sandpapery palm pulled him to his feet. The weeds that had trapped him fell away as if their job was done.

Chip was face-to-face with an old man. His worn, leathery face was full of concern. "I heard you yell for help. Is everything all right?"

"Uh, yeah. Thanks." The man wore an odd-looking hat with fishing lures sticking out from it — a hat that Chip had first thought was a hood. The old man held a cigar — not a knife. The moonlight glinted off its cellophane wrapper.

"Name's Nick Murphy," the old man barked. Chip shook his outstretched hand, surprised by the old guy's incredibly strong grip.

"Chip Parker," Chip said, pulling his hand back.

Mr. Murphy peeled the cellophane from his cigar. "I'm your neighbor. I live alone in that house over there." Mr. Murphy gestured to the house beyond the hedge. "Mrs. Murphy died quite some time ago."

Mr. Murphy pulled a large wooden match from the grimy front pocket of his red-and-black plaid lumberjack shirt. He flicked the match head with a gnarly fingernail and the match burst into flame. He held it to the cigar tip and puffed vigorously, squinting at Chip the entire time. Then he flicked the match away.

Chip had a brief vision of his backyard suddenly exploding — but nothing happened.

"I saw you moving around back here from my upstairs bedroom window," Mr. Murphy said. "And I thought for a moment you were my grandson, Johnny."

Johnny Murphy — the guy Alicia had told him about! The guy she thought had murdered Ellen with the red dragon switchblade knife. The guy she thought was one of Al's Red Dragon brothers.

"I could have sworn I saw him running through your yard the other night. Saw him looking in my kitchen window, too, when I was drinking my tea. It was hard to tell, though, with that hood pulled up around his face. If it were him, and if I caught him, I'd wring his blasted neck tighter than that noose he used to hang himself."

Chip's mouth gaped open. "Johnny hanged himself?"

"Yup," Mr. Murphy said, with more than a small note of pleasure. "Over at that loony bin where his parents locked him up. But as usual the boy couldn't do even that right. They found him and cut him down and took him to the hospital where some young hotshot doctor pulled him back to life. Waste of time and money if you ask me." Mr. Murphy puffed on his cigar, sending a blue plume of smoke into the cold night air.

Then Mr. Murphy narrowed his eyes at Chip. "That weren't you, was it? In my backyard, playing around, trying to scare an old man?"

"No, sir," Chip said firmly, but he wondered if it might have been Al.

Mr. Murphy pulled off his fishing hat and ran a big, rough hand through a surprisingly thick patch of snowy white hair. "Johnny wasn't a friend of yours, was he?" Mr. Murphy asked.

"No, sir," Chip said, shaking his head.

"Good for you," Mr. Murphy said. "That boy's a bad influence."

Can't be worse than Al, Chip thought. "We just moved here from Middleton, so we don't know a lot of people yet," Chip said, trying to make conversation.

Mr. Murphy's gaze moved across the desolate yard to Chip's house. His expression was a mixture of dread and revulsion. "Why in hell did you move into *that* place? If you don't mind me asking."

"Well, my mom got a good price on it, and it's near the store she's renting. She's opening up a doughnut shop. And since my dad died…"

Chip heard a loud crash from the kitchen. Both he and Mr. Murphy looked toward the sound. Chip could see the outlines of his mother and Al through the partially pulled kitchen shade, their arms slicing through the air as they gesticulated wildly.

Chip turned back to Mr. Murphy and saw that the old man was giving him a sympathetic look. "Family problems?" Mr. Murphy asked casually.

"Yeah," Chip said glumly. "It's kind of a weird situation with my mom and my brother."

"Can't be any weirder than that last family that lived here," Mr. Murphy said with a chuckle.

"So I heard," Chip said with a rueful smile. A cool breeze blew a tangle of dead weeds over his feet and away into the night.

"Johnny killed the blond-haired girl," Mr. Murphy said suddenly. "Helen, Ellen, or whatever her name was. Beautiful girl. The police blamed

it on the Walker boy, but I know it was that punk Johnny."

Chip eyed the old man closely. Alicia believed the same thing. "How… can you be so sure of that?"

"That he killed the girl?" Mr. Murphy asked.

Chip nodded.

"I saw him do it," Mr. Murphy blurted out. "Snatched her right off the street and murdered her. Right outside my house. I saw the whole damn thing!"

Chapter 29

The side door of Chip's house slammed loudly, startling Chip.

Then he watched as Al stormed out of the house, jumped into his van, and tore out of the driveway, leaving twin patches of smoking rubber.

Seconds later he heard the van screeching around a corner somewhere down Elm Street.

Chip gave Mr. Murphy an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, sir, but I think I should be going."

"Sure thing, kid," Mr. Murphy said in an understanding voice. "I'll be seeing you around. I hope everything works out for you and your family in your new home. At least I hope it works out better than it did for the previous owners." Mr. Murphy chuckled woefully.

"Thank you, sir."

"And stop calling me sir."

"Yes, sir," Chip said distractedly as he hurried toward the side door.

He saw his mother through the back kitchen window, a dark outline, sitting at the kitchen table with her head in her hands, her chest heaving.

Chip rushed into the kitchen and found his mother convulsing in sobs. He pulled a chair up next to her and wrapped his arms around her. "It's all right, Mom. Don't worry about Al. I think this old house is creeping him out a little bit." *And me, too,* Chip said to himself.

"You don't think it's a dump, do you?" his mother asked him stifling a sob.

"Not at all," Chip said in as sincere a voice as he could muster. *Haunted* maybe, he thought, but they had lived in worse dumps than this.

Mrs. Parker cried a bit more before managing to compose herself. Chip gave her a gentle squeeze on the shoulder and busied himself around the kitchen cleaning up jagged shards of glass. Al had apparently smashed the empty juice jug on the floor.

"I think Al's bummed out about moving. Maybe he misses his friends," Chip said.

"You mean those *hoodlums?"* Mrs. Parker asked with a sniffle, not really expecting an answer.

Yeah, those friends, Chip thought. *The Red Dragon brotherhood.* Except that maybe they had a chapter here, a chapter that was led by Johnny Murphy till he went bonkers and was shipped off to the crazy house. "I can't believe Al would imagine that anybody but Mike Parker was your father." Mrs. Parker shook her head forlornly. "I know he often says things just to be mean, but that is the most unusual thing I've ever heard. Who could be putting those thoughts in his head? Do you know, Chip?"

Chip only shrugged. "Like you said, sometimes Al just says things to be mean."

"I'd still like to know who is filling his head with such awful thoughts. I'd give him a piece of my mind," his mother said sternly. She rose from the kitchen chair, wiping her tear-streaked face with the sleeve of her dress.

"Al really is getting out of hand. I just hope he can make it through the school year without getting into any more trouble. Then he's on his own," Mrs. Parker said with a resigned air. "I did the best I could raising him."

Chip watched his mother cross to the stove. She lifted the lid on the curry and stirred it with the big wooden spoon. A spicy aroma filled the kitchen. "There's plenty to eat here if you're hungry, Chip."

"Okay, Mom," Chip said. His mother's vegetarian dishes weren't his favorite. Chip guessed that Al was already on line at McDonald's for his dinner.

"Well, I think I'll be getting back to the shop," Mrs. Parker said. "There's still so much to do."

"How are things over there? Do you need some help?"

"They're coming along fine, dear. Thanks for offering. But I can take care of it myself. Don't worry."

"Okay, Mom."

She pulled the odd-looking cape thing she wore as a coat off a wooden hook in the foyer and headed for the front door, patting her dress pocket lightly to make sure her car keys and wallet were in place. Chip intercepted her at the door and gave her a hug.

"Don't you worry either, Mom," Chip said.

"Thanks, hon, I needed that," she said. She closed the door behind her and waved.

Chip returned to the kitchen to finish cleaning up.

He plunged his hands into the dishwater.

And then he heard his mother scream.

Chip dashed through the living room and headed for the front door, choking back his panic. He realized for the first time that he believed his brother was capable of murder.

He pushed open the front door with a trembling hand. A pale moon floated low in a purple sky, and beneath the moon Chip saw his mother standing with her hands on her chest.

Standing in front of her was a dark, hooded figure.

Chip thought his heart might explode.

And then he heard his mother laugh. An embarrassed laugh. "You gave me such a fright," she said to the hooded figure.

"I'm sorry. I was just looking for Chip," said a familiar voice.

Chip hurried down the front steps as a wave of relief swept over him. "I'm right here."

His mother turned and stepped to the side and Chip saw Alicia looking back at him with an awkward smile. She was wearing a dark hooded sweatshirt over a pair of polka-dot leggings.

Chip pulled up short. He didn't know exactly how to greet her. She had left under such strange circumstances before.

"Hi, Chip," she said with a little wave.

"Hi."

Mrs. Parker fixed Chip with a bemused expression. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

"Oh…" Chip said, snapping out of it. "Mom, this is Alicia. Alicia, my mom."

"Glad to meet you, Alicia." Mrs. Parker said with a wide smile. "Do you go to Springwood High with Chip?"

"Not exactly," Alicia said. "I'm a neighbor."

"Alicia came over Saturday to help me clean the house," Chip said, thinking it was only a small lie — she had come over to help clean, but they had just never gotten around to it.

"Oh, how nice," Mrs. Parker said in a cheery voice. "It's wonderful to have such friendly neighbors." She dug into her pocket for her car keys. "Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to work I go," she sang, jingling her keys. "It was nice meeting you, Alicia." She turned to leave.

" 'Bye, Mrs. Parker. It was nice meeting you!" Alicia called after her.

Mrs. Parker walked to her station wagon parked out front beneath the pale shining light of the street lamp.

Chip watched his mother drive away.

"I like her," Alicia said, fixing him with those eyes that never ceased to amaze him. Day-Glo eyes that gleamed brightly in the moonlight.

Incredible, unusual eyes.

"You wanna talk?" Chip asked.

"Okay," Alicia said softly.

Chip took her hand and they walked to his house. Chip held the door open for her, but Alicia hesitated. She glanced past Chip. "Is your brother home?" she asked.

"No. He went out. I don't think he'll be back real soon."

Alicia turned to look over her shoulder and shuddered.

"What's the matter?" Chip asked.

"I had the weirdest feeling — like someone's watching me. It's been going on for days. I can feel eyes boring into my back, but when I turn to look, there's no one there. I guess I'm just being paranoid." She tried to shrug off her uneasiness, but Chip could see the fear in her eyes.

"After all," Alicia continued, "who would be following me? Why would someone want to spy on me?" She looked past Chip, still searching for the person she thought might be shadowing her.

Down the street Chip saw a light blue Civic parked in the shadows. Then the car lights flashed on and the Civic was rolling down the street toward them.

"C'mon, let's go into the house," Chip said, taking her by the arm and leading her inside.

Alicia sat at the kitchen table as Chip finished cleaning up the mess Al had made. "I guess I should apologize," Alicia said with an awkward smile, shifting uncomfortably on the kitchen chair and scratching at a spot on the Formica tabletop.

"You had me worried," Chip admitted. "Why'd you run out like that?"

"I guess it was something your brother said. About you being the son of *you-know-who."*

Chip laughed. "You can't be serious. You believed that?"

Alicia shrugged and gave Chip an embarrassed smile. "If you'd been through what I've been through…" Her voice trailed off and Chip tried to picture Alicia strapped into the chair.

"Scott Martin told me a little about what happened down there. But I don't believe all the things he said about you." At the mention of Scott's

name Alicia visibly stiffened.

"About me?" Alicia asked. She seemed on the verge of tears.

"I didn't take any of it seriously," Chip reassured her.

Alicia chewed on her lower lip for a moment. Her eyes were filled with sadness. "I loved him… once. Maybe I still do. I still wear his letter jacket. I was wearing it the night of our accident. Now it's all I have left of him."

She looked nervously at Chip. "Did he… tell you what happened in the basement?"

Chip nodded. "I heard his side of the story. What's your side?"

Alicia was hesitant. "My side's still a bad dream."

Suddenly Alicia turned pale. Chip hurried to her side. He put his hand on her neck. Her skin was hot to the touch.

She unzipped her sweatshirt. She was perspiring heavily. "Everytime I think of what happened that night I start to feel really sick."

Chip got Alicia a glass of cold water. She thanked him and took a big gulp.

"After what happened," she began, "we thought things were going to be all right again. Scott saw several plastic surgeons and they all believed his scars would heal in time. Then the strangest thing began to happen. His scars got *worse*. His whole face did. And his hand wouldn't heal. It turned into a claw. It was like there was a cancer inside of him, a cancer of fear, and it was twisting his face, his hand, his mind, making him even more deformed than ever.

"After a while, he wouldn't see me anymore," Alicia continued. "He wouldn't see anyone anymore because his face was so ugly. He wouldn't answer the phone when I called, and he wouldn't come to the door when I went to his house. I wrote him letter after letter but he never answered them. And yet… I had this feeling that he still cared about me. That he was watching me." Alicia's cheek began to tremble. "I can't get over that feeling that I'm being watched. By him, by everyone. That's why I don't go out very much anymore, and why I didn't go back to school — this feeling I have of always being watched."

"Well, I don't want to freak you out or anything," Chip said, "but he *is* following you."

"What?" Alicia asked, stunned.

Chip nodded. "And he's been keeping an eye on me and this house, too."

Alicia was mortified. "Why would he want to come back to this place, of all places?"

Chip shrugged. "I don't know why. But he was here, in the basement, burning your letters in the furnace."

Alicia's mouth fell open. "I don't believe this."

Chip told her about Scott breaking into the basement.

Alicia listened in amazement. "Scott's gone, he's totally gone," she said in dismay.

"He thinks there's an evil spirit floating around. Maybe in this house." Chip's eyes fixed on Alicia in a steady gaze. "And maybe in *you."*

"Me?" Alicia gasped, stunned. Her face turned completely white. "I know there's an evil spirit here." Her features grew tight with fear. "I've met the evil spirit here. In my dreams — my nightmares. But it's not *me."* She gave Chip an imploring look. "Is it?"

Chapter 30

Scott knew it was now or never.

He was parked just close enough to keep an eye on the house.

The evil house.

Al had left already, roaring down the street in his white van with an angry scowl on his face.

Not much later, the woman had left. Probably their mother.

And now Chip and Alicia were left. Chip with *his* Alicia. His lost Alicia.

His *evil* Alicia.

The same evil that had ravaged his face and destroyed his life.

Look at yourself, a voice commanded Scott. A voice that came from deep within. Scott turned the rearview mirror with a trembling hand and gazed at his reflection. He always trembled when he looked at himself. The gash so deep across his face. And growing deeper. His bad eye twittering more than ever. It was becoming like a cartoon eye, popped out of the socket, attached to a spring. His lip was drooping more and more every day, making his lisp even worse, and his teeth appeared to be growing sharper and more jagged with each passing moment.

Even if the plastic surgeons could put his face back together someday — what about his mind?

Who would put the shattered pieces of his mind back together?

When would it end?

It would end when the evil was gone. When it was incinerated. Ashes to ashes.

Now was the time to act. It was too bad that Chip had to die, too, but what else could he do? He had to kill the evil. The evil house and the evil girl. Before the evil spread.

Scott got out of the car and went around back to the trunk. He removed a ten-gallon gas container. Then he headed for Chip's yard, staying to the shadows, staying out of sight as much as he could. If they caught him later, he didn't care.

As long as he had burned the house down first.

Fight fire with fire.

Scott dashed past the driveway. The kitchen light was on. They were probably in there. He went around to the other side of the house. The basement window he had broken the other night hadn't been repaired yet.

He'd pour some gas into the basement. He'd start there, where the evil was the strongest. Then he'd spread the rest of the gas around. He'd have to figure out a way to keep them in the house as it burned.

At least keep Alicia in there.

If it meant he had to go inside the flames to keep her there, he was prepared to do it.

As Scott unscrewed the gas container, he heard footsteps crunching his way, crunching through dead leaves. Coming fast. Scott looked up, startled.

A hooded figure stood before him, a gleaming knife in his hand.

A knife with a red dragon handle.

"You!" Scott gasped, dropping the gas container. "How did you…"

The hooded figure thrust the knife blade into Scott's chest. When he pulled it out, crimson spurted everywhere. Scott, his eyes wide with horror, fell to his knees, clasping his hands over his heart. Then he fell face down into a tangle of dead weeds.

Moments later, Scott was as dead as the weeds.

The hooded figure picked up the gas container and poured gasoline over Scott's corpse. He cackled once, a sadistic chuckle, then set it on fire.

It blazed up like a Viking funeral pyre.

The murderer watched the fire lick and dance as he did his own little jig to the dead. Malicious laughter filled the frosty night air. Tongues of flames grew higher and higher into the sky as Scott's body turned a hideous black.

Then the hooded figure disappeared back into the night.

Chapter 31

Chip had spent the last ten minutes reassuring Alicia that she was not possessed by an evil spirit. He decided to change the subject. "Al and I found a passageway in our basement the other night," he said. "You wanna see it?"

"In the basement?"

"Yeah."

"No thanks."

"I think it leads outside somewhere. You've lived here for a while. What do you think it could be?" Chip asked.

Alicia gave it some thought. "A lot of the houses around here were part of the underground railroad. You know, where they used to hide runaway slaves. I guess it could be something like that."

Chip nodded. "So you think someone could get in and out of my house that way?"

"I guess so," Alicia said. "But why would anyone want to? It's horrible down there."

Chip shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe some neighborhood kids on a dare or something. I thought I'd follow it, to find out where it goes," Chip said, hoping Alicia would take the hint and accompany him. It was scary, and probably filled with rats, but that might work as an excuse for her to stay close to him, to hold his hand, jump into his arms…

"It probably comes out somewhere behind your backyard," she said. "In the woods. Someplace hidden."

"What's past the woods?"

"The Elm Street Cemetery," Alicia said.

In the distance they heard sirens. The blaring noise was coming closer.

Bang! Bang! Someone was knocking loudly on the front door.

Chip knocked his chair over backward as he scrambled to the door to see what was going on. He heard Alicia's chair scrape back as she followed him.

"What is it?" Chip yelled as he swung the door open. Nick Murphy was standing in front of him, his eyes bugging out, his chest heaving

frantically. "You better come out here, son!" he shouted. Then he noticed Alicia and said in a lower voice, "Don't let her see this."

"Alicia — wait here!" Chip shouted over his shoulder as he hurried after Mr. Murphy.

"I saw the fire from my bedroom window," Mr. Murphy said. "I already called 911."

Elm Street came alive with noise and flashing colors as first one fire engine then another rounded the corner and came up the street. A white EMS truck followed the fire trucks and two Springwood police cruisers brought up the rear. They all converged on Chip's house.

Chip rounded the corner of his house. At first it looked like someone had built a bonfire in the backyard. Then the smell of smoke, gasoline, and burning flesh filled his nostrils. The vile smoke stung Chip's eyes as he saw the horror. Scott Martin was shriveling up as the fire ate him away bit by bit. Most of the boy had already been consumed by the flames. Roasted like a cannibal's barbecue. But even though the body was charred beyond recognition, his face remained. What was left of Scott Martin made him easy to identify; he had a face you didn't easily forget.

Chip spun around and thought he might throw up.

He saw Alicia, frozen in horror, staring at the burning mess that used to be the boy she loved. Her eyes were wide open, taking in every bit of the grisly scene. Tears streamed down her face and her lips extended out in a silent sob.

Chip took a deep breath and fought back the knot tightening his stomach. He went to Alicia and turned her away from the gruesome sight. He pulled her into his arms and gently pushed her head against his shoulder. Her wild hair reflected the dancing, glowing flames. "Don't look," Chip said softly into Alicia's ear. "Don't look." The comforting gesture broke Alicia's stony silence. She convulsed into sobs.

The firemen rushed into the yard, unraveling hose. Water was turned on and aimed at Scott's black and smoking body.

Chip looked away from the nauseating sight and his eyes passed over what appeared to be a bright red gas container a few feet from Scott's outstretched fingers. The fingers that poked out of the cast that oddly hadn't burned. The white plaster gleamed brightly, eerily, in the moonlit yard.

Had Scott killed himself? Chip wondered. Burned himself to death?

A blue-uniformed policeman approached. "You live here?" he asked Chip, pulling a notepad from his back pocket.

"Yes, sir," Chip told the cop, still holding Alicia, staring at Scott again. Staring out of morbid curiosity.

"Did you know this guy?" the cop asked, gesturing to the smoking remains.

Chip tried to answer, but the lump in his throat choked off his words. A sharp, bitter smell assailed his nostrils. The bitter smell of death.

No wonder Alicia seemed so weirded out. He was beginning to feel the same way.

It seemed to come with the territory, on Elm Street.

Chip watched the firemen rewind the hose.

"You don't look so good," the cop said to Chip.

"I'm okay," Chip croaked, trying to swallow the lump in his throat so he could speak normally again.

"Did you know that guy?" the cop asked again, pencil tip poised on the notepad paper. "Sorry I have to bother you with questions, but I have to make out my report."

"No, it's okay," Chip said, finally regaining his voice. "It was… Scott Martin."

"Scott Martin?" the cop said, pushing his policeman's cap back on his head, looking more closely at the charred corpse. "The Spring wood quarterback?"

Chip nodded his assent.

"I'll be damned," the cop said, scribbling something down.

"Can you tell what happened?" Chip asked.

The firemen were restoring their gear into the fire engines. Some of the neighbors had come out on their porches to watch. Some just watched from behind drawn shades, as if they were afraid to go out, afraid of what they might see.

"It's hard to say for sure right now," the cop said, ruefully shaking his head, looking at Scott's corpse again. "But it looks like Martin was trying to burn down your house."

Chip's eyes wandered back to the grisly carcass.

"But he burnt himself up instead," Chip heard the cop say in a voice that seemed a thousand miles away.

Chapter 32

The next day after school, Chip was hurrying to football practice. It was the second and final day of tryouts, and Chip knew he hadn't played very impressively the day before. If he didn't shine today, he could kiss the quarterback position good-bye.

Coach Cuttler glanced up from his clipboard when he saw Chip trotting toward him. He blew his whistle shrilly and gathered the team around him as Chip jogged up. To Chip's surprise he saw Barney Peters standing at Cuttler's side. His face was heavily bandaged.

"All right, guys, listen up," Coach Cuttler bellowed so loudly Chip winced. "I've been hearing some nasty rumors circulating around the school and I want to clear this thing up right now!" He nodded to Barney. "Go ahead, Peters."

Barney spoke painfully in a soft voice. Everyone had to lean close to hear what he was saying. "I had an accident yesterday and I said some stupid things. Real stupid things. Mostly to Parker." Barney gestured to Chip. "The new guy over here. I accused him of pushing me down the stairs. But it never happened. He was just the first guy I saw after I fell, and I guess I wasn't thinking straight, and so I blamed him." Barney looked down at his feet, as if studying his toes.

"You never think straight, Peters," someone cracked from the back.

"Way to go, Peters," someone else chortled.

"He probably tripped himself with those giant feet of his," another guy cracked, and the whole team laughed, including Chip and Barney and Coach Cuttler.

Only Al didn't laugh, Chip noticed. Al was looking over everyone's head, in a world of his own, his football helmet tucked beneath his arm.

Coach Cuttler nudged Barney. Barney stepped forward and offered Chip his hand. Chip took it and shook it firmly.

"All right, everyone, let's get back to work." Coach Cuttler blew the whistle again, signaling that the players should get out onto the field so practice could begin. "You offensive linemen better start protecting your quarterback better or you'll all be doing extra laps after practice," Coach Cuttler shouted after them before turning his attention to Al.

Al stood alone, his pale blue eyes reflecting the sunlight. He was staring at Chip.

"Parker. Al Parker. Take the free safety position," Cuttler hollered.

"What about quarterback?" Al asked sullenly. "I want my shot at quarterback."

"Maybe if there's time after practice. I want Dawson to run a few plays and then I want to take a look at Chip again."

Al reluctantly slipped his helmet on, glaring at Chip the entire time.

"Let's hustle it up, Al Parker," Coach Cuttler said. "And try not to kill your brother this time."

Try not to kill your brother this time.

So it was Al who had leveled him yesterday. What had gotten into him lately? His brother was going totally bonkers. Since they had been living on Elm Street, Al had become increasingly reclusive. And Chip noticed he was spending more and more time in the basement.

Last night, after the police and fire engines had left, Chip had been in his room when he heard Al drive up in the van. Al went straight to the basement and Chip could hear him through the air vent again, talking to himself. The smell of McDonald's burgers had wafted up through the vent as well. Chip had caught a few phrases — something about Scott Martin — but most of the words were unintelligible. Chip had been so tired and disgusted by the evening's events that he wasn't even tempted to eavesdrop on his brother's ramblings.

Chip heard Coach Cuttler call his name, and his thoughts returned to practice. He couldn't afford to daydream now — not if he wanted to be quarterback. Chip jogged over to the coach.

"I'm going to let Dawson run a few plays so you can get an idea of the way our offense works. Which is what I should have done yesterday," Cuttler admitted. "So why don't you stick with Peters for now. He'll answer any questions you might have about the offense." Cuttler glanced at Barney, who was standing on the sidelines painfully picking at one of his bandages. "If he can," Coach added.

Chip nodded and jogged over to Barney. "You okay, big guy?"

"Yeah," Barney grumbled. "I'm going to need some serious dental work but I guess I never was much to look at anyway."

Chip laughed. "Thanks for straightening things out for me with the team. I'm sorry it happened. I thought maybe I saw you ahead of me on the

steps, and I had this weird feeling that you were going to be pushed. Not by me, of course, but by someone. I don't know how to explain it."

"I *was* pushed," Barney said in a soft voice.

His words sent a shiver down Chip's back. "Huh?"

"I was pushed," Barney said firmly. "I just don't think it was you. I've got a cousin who goes to Middleton. I talked to him on the phone. He says you're a good guy. So I probably screwed up identifying you. But I know for sure I was pushed."

Chip felt dazed. "So who pushed you? Do you have any idea?"

Barney shrugged. "It was too crowded to tell. But I definitely felt someone give me a shove." He glanced at Chip. "Did you see?"

"N-no, not really," Chip stammered. He didn't want to accuse Al and be mistaken.

"Well, if I ever find out, that guy is dead meat." Barney ran his tongue over what was left of his front teeth. Chip had to look away. His gaze shifted to the football field, where a play was already in progress. They were in a zone defense, and most of the receivers were staying out of Al's territory, Chip noticed. Bad news travels fast. One play and Al's reputation as a heavy hitter was securely in place.

And his reputation as a dirty player. A forearm shiver to the head was one of the dirtiest plays in football. Its sole purpose was to maim the quarterback, to take him out of the game.

"Run!" Chip heard some of the defensive guys yell, alerting the rest of the defense that the passing play had broken down and the quarterback was scrambling for his life.

Chip and Barney stepped back as Roger the Dodger Dawson scampered up the sideline toward them, the defense converging on him at a sharp angle. Roger should have gone out of bounds. It's what the defense thought he was going to do. But instead, Roger tried to cross them up and cut back against the grain, against the wall of defenders rushing his way.

Against Al, racing over from his free safety position.

Al planted his thick, heavily padded shoulder in Roger's midsection and took the smaller boy off his feet, slamming him hard into the turf, a clean but brutal shot. The ball bounced loose.

Al tossed Roger aside as if he were a rag doll, scooped up the ball, and started running in the opposite direction, high-stepping it all the way. He

didn't stop until he danced into the end zone with the ball held arrogantly above his head.

"That Parker kid can hit!" Chip heard Coach Cuttler say with admiration from a little way down the sideline.

Chip glanced at Al in the end zone, exchanging high fives with some of the defensive players. Then he looked back at Roger, on his back, still writhing on the ground in agony, his mouth twisted into a wide O of pain, one leg bent back at an impossible angle.

"My leg!" Roger screamed. "He broke my leg!"

Chapter 33

Boomer zipped his wheelchair over to where Roger lay prone on the ground. He motioned frantically to the team trainer. "Get a stretcher! Fast!"

"He needs an ambulance," Chip heard Barney mutter next to him.

Coach Cuttler slammed his clipboard to the ground when he saw that Roger was injured. "Goldangit!" he fumed. "That's two quarterbacks I've lost in two days. Who's next?"

Me, Chip thought, strapping on his helmet. He was the only one left.

The team trainer ran out onto the field followed by two second-string players carrying a stretcher. They gingerly lifted Roger and placed him on the stretcher. Chip started toward Coach Cuttler when he saw the jagged bone end poking through Roger's skin just below the knee.

Chip jogged past the stretcher, purposely averting his eyes. But he couldn't shut out Roger's torturous cries of pain.

"I'm kind of running out of options here," Coach Cuttler confided in Chip, almost apologetically. "We've got a big game Saturday and I have to suit someone up who knows how to play our kind of offense. You think you could run a few plays?"

"Absolutely," Chip said, feeling like the next lamb on the way to the slaughterhouse.

Coach Cuttler blew the whistle and gathered the team around him. "Ah… it looks like Dawson's going to be out of action for a while."

A few of the team members glanced back to where Roger's stretcher rested by the stadium exit.

In the distance a siren wailed.

Al stared off into the blue sky, a sky as light and blue as his cold eyes.

"Let's take it easy out there, fellas, okay?" Coach Cuttler implored. "I want you guys to play hard, even in practice, but I also want to be able to suit up enough guys to play our next game. So let's keep our heads up out there. Especially you offensive guards and tackles. Protect your quarterback. Okay? Let's go!" Coach Cuttler clapped his hands. The team responded with an unenthusiastic clap.

"I can't hear you!" Coach Cuttler bellowed like a marine boot-camp drill instructor.

The team responded a little more forcefully, then took the field. All except for Al. He was staring at Coach Cuttler and Chip. Cuttler referred to his clipboard. "Let's try that slant pattern again," he said to Chip, who was standing next to him.

"What about me?" Al asked.

"Ah, yeah, Parker, that hit looked clean on Dawson — don't worry about it." Cuttler glanced anxiously in Roger's direction. The ambulance had just arrived. "Just take it a little easier on our own players. Okay?"

"I wasn't worried about it," Al said calmly. "I just wanted to know when I was going to get my shot at quarterback."

"Let's cross that bridge when we come to it, shall we," Coach Cuttler said curtly, dismissing Al. "Stick with the free safety position for now. Maybe next week or the week after that I'll have some plays diagrammed for you, some plays better suited to your style of play. Just in case we need you."

Al fumed but said nothing.

As Chip jogged out to the field Al sidled up to him. "Be prepared to cross some bridges of your own, bro'," Al said, his voice full of malice.

Chip ignored him and joined the huddle. He knew the coach wanted him to run a slant play, but since Al had heard him say it, Chip didn't think it was a very good idea. "Who's the fastest guy on the team?" Chip asked.

A lean, whippetlike boy raised his hand.

"But Stevie Fumble-Easy's got hands of steel," someone said, and a few of the players laughed.

"Don't worry about it," Chip said. He locked gazes with Stevie. "Just head up the far sideline as fast as you can…"

"I'm supposed to stay in to help with the protection…" Stevie started to say.

"Don't worry about it. Just head up the sideline as fast as you can go." Chip fixed the other receiver with his steady brown eyes, the receiver who had run out of bounds the day before. "Stay in bounds this time," Chip said firmly, his voice commanding. "My brother will try to come over from the free safety position and drive you out of bounds, like he did before. It's an old trick of his. Don't fall for it again."

The receiver nodded, listening intently. The whole team was attentive now.

"And watch out for his forearm, Justin," the big guard named Sam said. "That's another trick of his."

Some guys chuckled, but not Justin.

As Chip broke the huddle he felt a steely resolve wash over him. He was going to win that quarterback position. And he was going to do it now. Coach Cuttler's screeching whistle caught his attention. The coach was over on the sideline, striding back and forth, clapping his hands.

"Let's go, offense," the coach shouted to Chip through cupped hands. Boomer was nervously wheeling up and down the sidelines in his wheelchair, right behind Cuttler, with Cuttler's clipboard in his lap, trying to keep up with the coach's nervous pacing.

Chip lined the team up. On three the ball was hiked. Chip took four steps back and planted himself, scanning the field, trying to disguise the play.

Stevie, out of habit, dropped back to help with the protection.

"Get up the field!" Chip screamed at Steve, shoving him with his free hand. "Go, go, go!"

Steve, startled back to attention, shot past the onrushing linebackers and dashed up the far sideline. Chip rolled out of the pocket to buy time for his receiver to get up the field.

Then he swiveled his head and fixed his attention on Justin just as Justin was making his cut. He planted his lead leg and pumped a pass in Justin's direction to fake out the defense.

As Chip anticipated, Al came dashing over to lower the boom. Justin looked up just in time to see Al coming. He dove to the ground as Al, forearm swinging, flew over him.

Then Chip whirled about and looked up the field for Stevie. Stevie had outraced the man covering him, and, without the free safety in position to double cover, had managed to break free. Chip reared back and threw the football with every ounce of strength he had, putting his full body weight behind it.

The ball shot across the football field at a difficult angle, traveling over sixty yards through the air, as if it had been shot out of a cannon.

Even from sixty yards away Chip could see the startled look on Stevie's face as the ball thudded into his stomach with such force he couldn't have dropped it if he wanted to. Stevie's momentum sent him hurtling into the end zone.

Touchdown!

Chip's fist shot into the air. He trotted off the field as if he had just completed the easiest pass of his life. All around him his offensive line was jumping up and down, giving each other high fives, excited by the magnificent pass. On the sidelines Coach Cuttler was beaming with a mixture of euphoria and disbelief. As Chip came nearer he heard Coach Cuttler chortle to Boomer that he had found his quarterback.

Standing a few feet behind Cuttler, Chip saw Al rip his helmet off and drop kick it halfway across the football field.

As Chip watched Al's helmet bound away, he had the unnerving feeling he was watching his own head roll across the field.

Chapter 34

"Thanks for coming with me," Alicia said, standing next to Chip a few evenings later.

"No problem," Chip said, peering about the cemetery. On the horizon the sun was just going down. It would be dark soon.

"I wanted to say good-bye to Scott in private," Alicia said. Chip looked about the deserted, spooky-looking cemetery. This was about as private as it got.

"Ali," Chip said, "why don't you come back to school? You haven't been out that long. You can still make up your classes and graduate with your class if you come back now."

Alicia didn't answer. She just kept her eyes fixed on Scott's tombstone.

Chip had gone to the funeral services yesterday. He hadn't told Alicia. He didn't want her to know how few people had been there. There were almost no mourners besides Scott's family. And Boomer. Boomer in his wheelchair with a dark, bitter smile crimping his face.

Alicia had told him that Boomer and Scott had been best friends, and Chip could only imagine the range of painful emotions Boomer must have been feeling at the funeral. Just a few weeks before, Scott had been a local hero.

Now Scott's broken and burnt body was just a memory, even while the dirt above his grave was still fresh.

Chip wondered if there were so few mourners because Scott was a reminder of the curse that hung over Elm Street. The unseen terror that lurked in every shadow, in every thought of everyone who lived in Springwood.

Well, almost everyone.

His mother liked it here.

And his brother, oddly enough, appeared to be getting used to living on Elm Street.

Chip wondered what Al would do after graduation — if he did graduate. Al had no future to prepare for, no dreams or goals, except to be a professional quarterback.

And since Chip had been named starting quarterback for tomorrow's game, and probably for the rest of the season unless he got hurt, the chances were remote that Al would be offered a sports scholarship to play quarterback at any college.

Now Al's only goal in life is to hate me more, Chip thought morosely. *Without me to hate, Al wouldn't even have a life.* Before they moved to Elm Street, Chip and Al would toss the football around together, and even though the play was rough, it was still friendly. But since they had moved to the new house, that had all changed. Al and Chip hardly spoke anymore. And Chip was growing more than a little afraid of his big brother. Al had been pumping iron more and more lately, often all night it seemed, and had bulked up tremendously. He was solid muscle, even with all that junk food he ate down in the basement every night.

Chip heard Alicia sniffle. He looked over and saw her face wet with tears.

"I really did love Scott," Alicia told Chip as another tear rolled down her cheek. "I thought right after… the murders… everything would be all right. He seemed so optimistic that the plastic surgeons could repair his face, that he could live a normal life again."

The wind wailed through the trees that grew alongside the cemetery, bending them to its will. Somewhere in the distance Chip thought he heard a siren howl, and howl again, coming closer, growing louder, as the sun sank over the horizon.

Alicia removed Scott's letter jacket and wrapped it around the cold granite tombstone. "He must be so cold down there," Alicia said, staring at the fresh mound of dirt that covered the casket.

Unless he's burning, Chip thought, *burning in hell.* Chip was still unsure of Scott's intentions the night he had died.

"Rest in peace, Scott," Alicia said in a soft whisper.

Chip watched Alicia say her gentle good-bye. She looked so lovely, even through such intense sadness. When she looked up and saw him staring, her expression warmed even more. Then her eyes darted away from Chip's face over his shoulder, and she gasped.

"Alicia — what is it?" Chip's head shot in the direction she was staring. He saw nothing. Just a rat perched on top of a gravestone, staring at them, before scampering away.

"Johnny!" Alicia's eyes were wide with disbelief, still staring up the gently sloping hill of tombstones. "I just saw Johnny Murphy."

"Where?" Chip's eyes scanned the area, looking for Johnny, looking for anyone.

"Up by Ellen Sawyer's gravestone," Alicia said, pointing. Her finger was trembling. "He was hiding behind it. Spying on us."

Chip looked in the direction she was pointing, but still saw no one. Just the setting sun dipping beneath the horizon line as the evening sky turned to a soft gray. The wind suddenly picked up and swirled about their feet.

"I met Johnny's uncle and he told me Johnny tried to hang himself," Chip said.

"I know," Alicia said. "His heart stopped and he was dead for several minutes — but they cut him down in time to revive him."

"He's still in the hospital, isn't he?" Chip asked.

"Are you sure it was him?"

"I'm not *sure*. It was hard to tell who I saw. He had his hood pulled up around his head."

Chip felt a chill go through him. "He was wearing a hood?"

"Yes," Alicia said without hesitation.

Chip's eyes drank in the area around Ellen's gravestone. Shadows danced across her mound of dirt, also fairly fresh, cast by a pale moon shining through the branches of an ancient maple tree. The sky was rapidly growing a soft charcoal color. A few stars came out, faint but growing, as the wind picked up again.

"C'mon, I'll walk you home," Chip said, feeling increasingly nervous in the cemetery as the night grew darker. Johnny or no Johnny, Alicia seemed certain there was someone spying on them. Chip and Alicia locked hands and hurried toward the cemetery entrance.

Chip looked up when he heard a fluttering sound. Several dark shadows dipped and twirled in the air above, making zigzag patterns, flying erratically.

"Bats," Alicia said, turning her face to the darkening sky. "The woods are full of them."

Chip picked up his pace. The surrounding trees were hulking, dark, full of hungry eyes that followed their every step.

"Before, on the way over here, when we were talking about Evan and his uncle and the house and stuff, didn't you tell me Dr. Hawke's heart

stopped?"

"Yeah."

"Scott said the same thing. And they got it going again, right?"

Again Alicia nodded.

"And they found Johnny dead and got his heart going again, too, right?"

Alicia said nothing for a few moments. "What do you think it means?"

"You tell me," Chip said, his voice quaking a little. "But Scott believed an evil spirit entered Dr. Hawke's body. Like taking over an empty shell."

"He also thought it took over me," Alicia reminded him.

Chip paused. "Yeah, I guess you're right." He pushed the macabre thought to the back of his mind.

"You think it's in Johnny, now, don't you?" Alicia asked, as if reading his mind.

An owl hooted nearby. Chip heard a crack, like a twig breaking, in the woods just ahead of them. Then a rustling of dead leaves.

Chip tensed his body, ready to fight whatever it was that lay ahead of them. Maybe he could hold it off long enough for Alicia to get away.

Something darted out of the woods at them. Alicia uttered a startled cry of surprise and Chip leapt back as a raccoon scampered out of the woods, spotted them, and then shot back into the woods again. Chip relaxed his taut muscles. He could hear Alicia's heart pounding. Or was it his own?

Still hand in hand, they began to jog. Chip realized that it had been a mistake to go to the cemetery that late. Night comes too quickly to the autumn sky, and the Elm Street cemetery was no place to linger after dark — not if you wanted to stay above ground.

Chip strained to see up the dark path, watching out for things they might trip over. Beside him he could hear Alicia breathing heavily as she tried to keep up with him. Chip imagined he heard whispering all about, saw dark hooded forms hunkering behind every tree and bush with eyes staring out at them, switchblades gleaming through the blackness.

The murmuring in the woods seemed to grow louder as the wind thrashed a tall oak tree, sending down a painful shower of hard acorns. They ran faster, their sneakers crunching on the flat, dead leaves. Scraggly, thorny bushes growing alongside the trail tore at their jeans as they ran by.

Finally they reached a clearing in the woods. The sirens Chip had heard before were louder now. A short distance away he saw the back of his

house in shadow against the dark sky. The TV antenna hung from the chimney at a crooked angle as if lightning had struck it. In fact, everything about the house looked crooked to Chip.

And yet it was a welcome sight after their harrowing run through the dark woods. He stopped to catch his breath, to breathe a sigh of relief, to give his thudding heart a chance to slow down.

Alicia stopped next to him, holding her side as she gasped for air. Their hot breath steamed the cold night air with wisps of white.

The wailing sirens stopped, and their silence filled Chip with dread. They had sounded so close. Too close.

They crossed the clearing to the back fence that bordered his yard. Chip shot one last glance over his shoulder to make sure they hadn't been followed. He felt unsteady, shaky, as if he might burst out screaming.

They hadn't run fast enough, or far enough.

On the other side of the clearing was the hooded figure, his breath steaming up about his face, staring back at them with lunatic eyes…

Chapter 35

"Hurry! We've got to hop the fence!" Chip said to Alicia. Chip climbed the back fence first so he could help Alicia over next. But when he landed on the other side his foot hit something and he toppled forward, his arms and legs sprawling as he fell. He sat up, his gaze scanning the moonlit yard to see what had tripped him up.

It was the odd-looking clay girl, half buried in the loose dirt. He had stepped on its head, crushing it.

"Chip? Are you all right?" came Alicia's voice from the other side of the white picket fence, and then Chip saw part of her body rise above it. He clamored to his feet and helped her over, staring past her across the clearing to where the hooded figure had stood.

There was nothing there.

They cut through his backyard. In the driveway Chip saw Al's white van parked next to their mother's station wagon. Al hadn't been home a little while ago. And why was his mother home? She had said she'd be working late.

They made their way past the vehicles and onto Elm Street. Chip walked Alicia the short distance to her house and said good night before Alicia's creepy mother could come to the door.

As Chip approached his own house he saw old Nick Murphy hurrying toward him as fast as his elderly legs would carry him. "Is she all right?" Mr. Murphy asked, his leathery face filled with worry.

"Is who all right?" Chip asked.

"Your mother."

Chip felt his head swim. "What happened?" he asked, his voice a harsh, raspy whisper. He felt a lump grow in his throat as he looked quickly at his house. It was totally dark, except for a dim light shining through the broken basement window.

"I don't know," Mr. Murphy said, scratching his thick patch of white hair with gnarly, yellow, tobacco-stained fingers. "They took her away in an ambulance not more than ten minutes ago."

The sirens he had heard running home from the cemetery.

They had been for his mother.

Oh god no, a voice inside Chip's head screamed — Al murdered Mom!

Chapter 36

Chip rushed into the house. He found the basement door open, the stairs in almost total darkness. He flicked on the light. A naked bulb — the one he had replaced just that morning — blinked on at the bottom of the stairs, barely penetrating the gloom.

Chip heard voices coming from the basement.

Then he saw in the light cast by the naked bulb the splattered blood.

Fresh, glistening blood.

His mother's blood?

Chip gasped. The sight filled him with dread. He had to find out what had happened, and if Al was responsible…

Chip gripped the staircase banister with a sweaty palm and started his way down. The bottom seemed like a million miles away, at the end of a long, dark tunnel. When he reached the basement, he saw that the office door was open a crack. Light was bleeding out.

From inside the office Chip heard voices. Chip carefully stepped around the puddle of blood and made his way to the door. "Al?" he called, bracing himself, not knowing what to expect.

The voices stopped.

"Al!" Chip shouted, reaching for the door.

Suddenly Al stepped out of the small office, closing the door behind him. He was wearing the hooded sweatshirt he always wore when he lifted weights, and he was sweaty. Chip stared at his brother.

"What?" Al asked impatiently. "I'm busy, punk."

"What are you doing in there?"

"I'm taking a break from pumping iron. I like to sit in that goofy chair. It's comfortable." Al shifted his weight nervously from one foot to another. "So now that you know what I do in my spare time, why don't you scram."

"Who were you talking to in there?" Chip asked. He was too angry to be intimidated.

Al hesitated for a moment, his eyes shifting to the door, then back to Chip. "No one."

"Don't give me that, Al. I heard you talking to someone." Chip could tell his brother was lying.

"I was talking to myself. All right?"

"You've been talking to yourself an awful lot lately."

"So?" A smug expression crossed Al's face. "What's it to you?"

Chip's gaze shifted to the crimson splatter, then back to Al. "What happened to Mom?"

Al nonchalantly unwrapped the tape from his wrists. His hands were all chalky. And there was blood on them. "Mom had a little accident."

"What kind of accident?" Chip asked, his voice rising.

"I guess she tripped, fell down the basement stairs," Al said with a smirk. "She really should be more careful, watch where she's going…"

Chip punched Al as hard as he could, punched him right in the face, right in the middle of his big, ugly smirk.

The punch sounded unusually loud to him — like a cartoon sound effect.

Al staggered back a few steps and would have fallen if it hadn't been for the office door. He leaned against the door, dazed.

But Chip wasn't done with him yet. The image of his mother, her body lying broken and bleeding on the basement floor, filled him with rage. White, hot, murderous rage.

"I'll kill you," Chip screamed at Al, advancing toward him, hatred in his eyes, his hands rolled into fists at his sides, clubs to smash Al with. "I'm going to jam those barbells right up your…"

"You stupid jerk!" Al spat at him, spat blood from his bloody mouth. Then he whipped out his switchblade. He flicked the knife open with a well-practiced motion and held the weapon menacingly in front of him. "I didn't do anything to *your* mother. I found her at the bottom of the stairs when I got home and I called 911. I don't know what happened to her. I wasn't even here. You can ask her yourself if you don't believe me."

"Liar!"

"Am I?" Al asked, making little circles with the gleaming knife blade. "Am I? So prove it. Come here and prove it."

Chip took a few steps backward, keeping his eyes on his brother, then he spun around and raced up the basement stairs. He yanked the kitchen wall phone off its cradle, got the hospital phone number from information, and quickly punched it in. After a few inquiries, he discovered his mother was in the Intensive Care Unit. He waited impatiently in the dark kitchen

while they put him through to someone else. He kept his eyes glued to the top of the basement stairs, expecting Al to come up at any moment.

Another voice came on the line and told him that his mother was still unconscious but in stable condition. They had no more information for him.

Chip said thank you and hung up the phone.

Mom was stable. He wished he could say the same thing about himself.

Chip heard the basement stairs creak as Al came up for him.

Al stood in the dim light at the top of the stairs, dabbing his bloody lip with the tape he had unraveled from his wrists, leaving little red marks on the binding. "You made me bleed, you little punk," Al said, his eyes burning with hatred. "And now you're going to pay big time."

Chip stood frozen, his body tense, waiting for his brother to make the next move.

"Your day has come at last," Al said ominously, challenging his brother with his eyes as he dabbed blood from his lips. Chip could see the bulge in Al's sweatpants pocket where he knew the knife was. "Or maybe I should say your *night* has some. Your *last* night."

Chip's eyes quickly swept the dark kitchen, looking for a knife to even up the odds. A big butcher knife would do. But all he saw was his mother's wooden stirring spoon in the dirty pot covered with curry gook. He'd throw the whole damn mess on Al.

"Okay bro'. We'll do it tonight. Tonight we'll get down."

"Right now," Chip said.

"Nah," Al said. "I'll pick the time. I think I'll make you squirm first. I like to watch you squirm. Squirm like a stuck pig. But tonight's the night, bro'. Tonight we get down."

Al smirked. Then he went out the side kitchen door. Chip heard him start the van. The headlights from the van suddenly lit the kitchen in garish yellow colors as he backed down the driveway. Then the lights rolled out of the kitchen and the van headed down Elm Street and everything was quiet.

Except for Chip's thundering heart.

And his heavy breathing.

And the frenzied thoughts whirring about inside his head chattering loud, dark prophecies to him.

Now it was just a matter of time, Chip knew, just a matter of time before all hell exploded like a fiery volcano, with Al the center of the

eruption, swimming in the molten lava of his own hatred.

Chapter 37

Chip went up to his bedroom and shut the door that never seemed to latch. He pushed the futon against the door to keep it closed — and to warn him if anyone should try to get in. He lay down and stared out the window at the skeletal branches of the elm tree. Its branches were being tossed about by the wind, making the inside of his room come alive with jagged shadows.

He kicked off his sneakers.

Maybe he should shut the windows and lock them.

But he was so tired. Too tired to get up now that he was lying down.

Maybe later. After he'd slept a little.

He was exhausted. He needed rest. Badly.

He had to be ready when Al returned.

Because Al never slept, it seemed.

Chip's body felt as if it weighed a thousand pounds, his head as heavy as a cannonball. His eyelids could no longer resist the pull of gravity. He needed sleep. Sleep…

As he lay there, he listened for sounds outside his bedroom door, sounds of Al sneaking back in, sounds of Al moving up the stairs, sounds of Al coming to get him.

But all he heard was the eerie creaking and groaning the old house made as it tried to settle itself.

The house couldn't sleep either.

Chip heard Al's van drive up, the headlights rolling through his bedroom and creating a whir of distorted shadows on the walls. He heard the engine shut off, the van door open and slam shut, and then the bang of the kitchen door that told him Al was inside the house.

He listened for a while. No more sounds for long heavy seconds.

And then voices came up the air vent.

The wood he'd tossed in the stove crackled as it caught fire. Chip could feel the warmth begin to spread through the room.

Bang!

The little metal trapdoor on the cast-iron stove clanked open.

Chip gaped in disbelief.

Eerie red smoke was pouring out the top of the stove!

Chapter 38

The shock of the dream woke her.

Alicia sat up in bed, her body bathed in sweat. The nightmare had seemed so real, so horrifyingly real. In her dream Johnny Murphy had attacked her in the basement of Chip's house. He had grabbed her and was dragging her to the furnace, his lunatic eyes burning like red rubies.

And in the glowing red of his pupils she saw tiny fire-breathing dragons.

She swung her feet out of bed and let them hit the cold, bare wooden floor. She sat on the edge of the bed listening to the voices downstairs.

Voices?

Downstairs?

Who was downstairs at this time of night?

Her mother seldom spoke to anyone during the day. Alicia threw on her terry-cloth robe and quietly slipped out of her room. She padded to the head of the stairs. Her mother had the front door open and was talking to two men, both dressed in dull gray suits, the expressions on their faces as somber as their colorless clothing. They were apologizing to her mother for disturbing her at this late hour, and then they were walking away.

Alicia came halfway down the stairs, alarmed by the pale expression on her mother's face. "Mom — what is it?"

"The police," her mother said, her voice becoming shrill.

Alicia felt her heart start to pound. "What did they want?"

"Johnny Murphy escaped from the insane asylum Friday night. He was in the hospital wing and they weren't guarding him that closely because they thought he was too feeble to get out of bed — but apparently he made a remarkable recovery. The police are canvassing all the neighborhoods, telling everyone to be on the lookout for him."

Friday night! Alicia thought. *That was days ago, and they're only warning us now?*

"They should have come to Elm Street *first* if they wanted to find a madman." Her mother's voice was bitter. "Elm Street's the devil's playground." She stumbled back to the living room couch, mumbling

incoherently. Alicia wondered if Elm Street had claimed her mother's mind, too.

But she couldn't distract herself with thoughts like that. She had to warn Chip. Now she was sure it was Johnny she had seen at the cemetery.

Had Johnny been hiding at the cemetery since Friday night? It didn't seem likely. Someone would have spotted him by now. A caretaker, maybe, or one of Scott's mourners.

Then a chilling thought struck her.

She remembered Chip telling her about the secret passageway that connected to his basement. The tunnel that led to the woods outside his house. The woods that separated his house from the Elm Street Cemetery.

And now she knew where Johnny was hiding.

She ran up to her room, threw on her clothes, then hurried back down the stairs. Her heart pounded with pile driver force. She prayed she wasn't too late. As she raced through the living room on her way to the front door, her mother called to her, "Where are you going?"

Alicia stopped and spun around. It always seemed dark in her house. Even in the daytime. More shadows for her mother to hide in. "Where are you going?" her mother repeated, her voice gripped with panic.

Alicia didn't answer her.

"You're going back there! Aren't you!" her mother screeched. "You're going back to the devil's house."

Alicia grabbed a down jacket from the coat rack in the foyer and slipped it on as she hurried out the door.

"Come back!" Alicia heard her mother's cry from the front door. "Come back before it's too late!"

Chapter 39

Chip sat up and stared at the stove, at the smoke coming out. He knew he wasn't dreaming this time. He moved across the futon as far as he could, until his back hit the bedroom door. The eerie red smoke reformed into the ghost of Evan Walker.

Evan turned his eyeless sockets toward Chip.

Chip felt his mind coming unhinged as he stared back at the ghost. Evan drifted across the room till his red form was directly over the air vent. He pointed down the same way he had a few nights before.

A chilly breeze blew through the window, and the red mist dissolved into the cold air.

Voices filtered up the air vent. Chip's forehead beaded with tiny cold dots of sweat.

Chip went over, got down on his hands and knees, put his ear to the open vent, and listened.

"…had to do it… no choice… mother would have thrown you out… finish her off… trust me… finish him off… we are brothers… Red Dragon… brothers in blood… the house will be yours… Martin would've burned the house… clubhouse… I took care of Martin… you take care of Alicia to prove to me and the brotherhood… be number one… needs to be done… he's the son of Krueger… chip off the old block…"

He's the son of Krueger.

"I'm the son of Krueger?" Chip whispered harshly to himself. "Freddy Krueger's my father? No. No way."

Who was making those insane accusations? Whoever it was had something to do with his mother's accident. And the murder of Scott Martin. Now he wanted Al to kill him and Alicia. Tonight.

Chip kept his ear pressed to the vent. It was so hard to hear. He could understand only little bits here and there, just snatches of conversation.

"…chip off the old block… he'll get you if you don't get him… only a matter of time… get him first… it's us against them… brothers in blood… be a winner… destroy the evidence… burn him after you…"

Chip felt his blood pumping in his temples. He had to do something — but what?

He had an idea…

Chip frantically dug his Walkman out of a canvas bag he still hadn't unpacked. He could record the conversation on tape and give it to the police. He just had to get close enough to do it. The voices coming up the air vent were too garbled, and his Walkman wasn't that great to begin with.

He'd have to go down into the basement.

Chip tugged on his sneakers and stood up, determined. He slipped the tiny Walkman into his jeans pocket and pulled the futon away from the door.

Slowly, silently, carefully, he cracked the door and peered down the darkened hallway. The coast looked clear.

He crept down the hallway, trying to keep the floorboards from creaking, and made his way into the kitchen. He looked in one drawer after another until he found what he was looking for: the big knife his mother used to slice her homemade bread. The very big, extremely sharp knife. He slid it into his belt, like a sword, and made his way to the top of the basement stairs.

He hesitated a moment. It wasn't too late to run. He felt as if his limbs were drugged, too heavy to make them go to the stairs, or run away.

He knew he had to do this.

Or he'd live in fear — looking over his shoulder always.

He could hear them down there, whispering, chattering, their conspiratorial voices drifting up to him.

Chip inched his way down the stairs, willing his legs to stop trembling and to move, wincing at every squeak he made, until he was at the bottom.

He stepped over the blood splatter, another reminder of his mother's fall, and crossed the basement floor to where a crack of light showed beneath the door of the old examination room.

The voices were coming from in there.

Chip knelt down and peeked in the keyhole.

The fire in the furnace was roaring.

There were two hooded figures in the room standing just below the vent. They had their sleeves rolled up past their elbows and were carving red lines, bloody lines, into their arms with identical red dragon switchblade knives. One of the hooded figures turned toward him. It was Al, grinning like a panting dog.

Then the other hooded figure turned. Dark, maniacal eyes peered out from the dark triangle of the hood, eyes that glowed bright red. Chip remembered that face from the summer football league. Johnny Murphy!

Chip watched in dazed horror as Al and Johnny smeared their bloodied arms together.

"Now we're of the same blood. Now and forever," Johnny said in a mesmerizing voice, his psychotic eyes boring into Al, as if hypnotizing him. Eyes that burned like bright red rubies. Just like in Chip's dream. Al nodded dumbly, a lurid grin stretching the skin ludicrously tight across his face. "All others must die…"

"All others must die…" Al repeated as if in a trance.

"Ashes to ashes," Johnny said.

"Ashes to ashes," Al repeated.

The eerie glow from the crackling fire made their faces look like skulls.

They're planning to kill me, Chip thought as another chill cut through his body.

And stuff me in the furnace.

Like the others before me.

And the others after me.

Chip could feel his chest heave as he tried to keep from hyperventilating, his eye still glued to the keyhole. Then a tremendously loud pounding on the side door upstairs distracted him. Still kneeling, he shot a glance over his shoulder.

More pounding.

Then he heard his name called.

"Chip! Chip!"

Alicia's voice.

The examination room door suddenly burst open.

Startled, Chip toppled backward.

Al and Johnny stared down at him. Two sets of wild, homicidal eyes boring into him like laser beams, their switchblades still in their hands.

At first they seemed surprised to see him there.

And then happy.

Al was still grinning his lurid grin. "Well, well, well — look who's here. Save us the trouble of coming up to get you."

More pounding on the door upstairs.

"Chip! Chip!" Alicia's voice was frantic.

"Hail, hail, the gang's all here," Johnny sang in a grotesquely cheerful voice.

Panic-stricken, still on the basement floor, Chip began to pull the long cutting knife out of his belt, but Al easily kicked it away. Out of reach.

Johnny loped across the basement floor to the foot of the stairs. "Come on down and join the party!" he shouted up to Alicia in Chip's voice. Chip's identical voice.

Chip stared at Johnny with a bewildered expression. Even Al's eyes flickered nervously.

"Chip?" came Alicia's voice from the top of the stairs, sounding small and faraway. "Is that you? Are you all right?"

"Down here," Johnny said in Chip's voice. "Alicia Norris — come on down!" Johnny bellowed enthusiastically as if he were a game show host.

Alicia hesitated at the top of the stairs.

"Ali — run!" Chip shouted.

"Alicia Norris — come on down!" Johnny called again in a cheerful version of Chip's voice.

Alicia came partway down the stairs, then froze. Her mouth locked in shock and terror.

"Run!" Chip shouted again. He knew he was doomed, but maybe she could still escape.

Chip watched as Johnny beckoned to Alicia with his finger. Only now the fingernails were long and sharp and had turned black like an animal's claw. "I want you to meet someone special," Johnny said, this time in a voice that was oddly metallic and inhuman.

"Yeah, Alicia," Al said, his voice hollow. "Johnny's been telling me some mighty interesting things I thought you might like to know. Seems he did a little digging around in the state hospital files before he broke out. He found Krueger's old file. Turns out Krueger had a son after all. And he really was a chip off the old block. And guess who it is?"

"Yeah, guess," Johnny said, his eyes glinting madly, glowing red like the furnace fire across the room as he kept beckoning to Alicia to come down the stairs with fingers that were now growing long and knifelike. Razor-sharp fingers.

Chip thought his mind might come unglued.

The furnace fire crackled loudly.

"I'd like you all to meet my son. He's a chip off the old block." Johnny's voice had turned rough and gravelly, like he had a throat full of ground-up glass.

Then Johnny walked over to Al and gave him an affectionate squeeze on the shoulder with a razory hand.

"Say hello to the nice people at home — *Alfredrick!"* Johnny tugged down his hood. Then he pulled a fleshy mask off his face with a sickening tear. The face underneath was hideously scarred and melted, the slimy brains exposed and shining like a bowl of glistening oatmeal.

Chip couldn't take his eyes off the savage, brutal face. Frozen in terror, he was stuck to the ground, like a fly caught in a spider's web.

Alicia screamed.

Al slowly turned his head toward Johnny, his face filling with horror. "Dad?" Al rasped in disbelief.

The boiler fire flickered madly.

Freddy Krueger cackled loudly, his raspy voice breaking through Alicia's screams, his foul, disgusting breath filling the basement air with a stench worse than decaying meat. He smiled, revealing two uneven rows of small, brown, rotten teeth. "The game of life's a lot like football. But this is one game I think's going to end in sudden death!"

Krueger smiled wickedly at Al. "Right, *son?"*

"Right, Dad," Al replied in a hoarse whisper, the words choking him. His pale blue eyes lit up and burned brightly with madness. "It's so great to meet you after all these years. I knew someday my wish would come true."

Then Al slammed the red dragon switchblade knife into Krueger's heart.

Krueger tottered backward, shock registering on his hideous face. A razory hand gripped the red dragon handle of the knife sticking out of his heart. He staggered toward the open examination room door and almost stepped on Chip.

Chip rolled out of the way and rose shakily to his feet, his mind numb with the horror unfolding before him.

Suddenly Krueger's mouth dropped open and flames shot out as he pulled the knife out of his heart and plunged it into Al's skull. He braced himself against the door frame with his other hand, struggling not to fall.

Al fell to his knees. The knife jutted grotesquely out of his head.

Adrenaline pumping through his system, Chip bolted past Al. He ran across the basement floor and headed for the stairs. He ran partway up the stairs, tripped, and slipped back down the stairs.

He flashed a terror-filled glance over his shoulder.

Krueger pointed at him, then at the furnace fire. "You're up next!" he said and cackled loudly.

Chip screamed hysterically, unable to move.

Then suddenly Alicia was at his side. She yanked him to his feet. "We've got to get out of here!" Alicia shrieked, shaking Chip, shaking him hard, shaking him out of his dazed state.

"No!" Krueger roared in a husky voice, still clinging to the doorway, blood dripping from his heart. "You're mine!"

Chip's stare swiveled to Krueger. Krueger's eyes were shining a bright red, drawing him into the examination room, drawing him into the fire, drawing him with irresistible force.

Then Al, the knife still sticking repulsively in his skull, suddenly leapt from the floor and slammed into Krueger with a football tackle, slammed into him with all his might as if he had been shot out of a cannon.

Al drove Krueger back, back into the fire, his momentum carrying both of them into the glowing furnace.

And then the boiler door slammed shut with a resounding clang as Chip and Alicia escaped up the stairs and out into the chilly night.

Epilogue

Fire was everywhere.

The hellish flames licked all around the tall, angular man, climbing their way up his body.

With razor-tipped fingers, he tossed a football into the air. It burst into flames and exploded in a shower of sparks that rained down over his striped football jersey.

"I love a good halftime show," Freddy Krueger said, adjusting the shoulder pads and slicing a rip into the fabric of his uniform. His red eyes glowed and the pupils turned into little TVs. On the screens, Chip and Alicia were racing out of the house on Elm Street.

"But you know what they say: 'It's not over till it's over… "